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STRANGULATION
KUBISHIME ROMANTICIST
No Longer Human - Hitoshiki Zerozaki

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Illustrations
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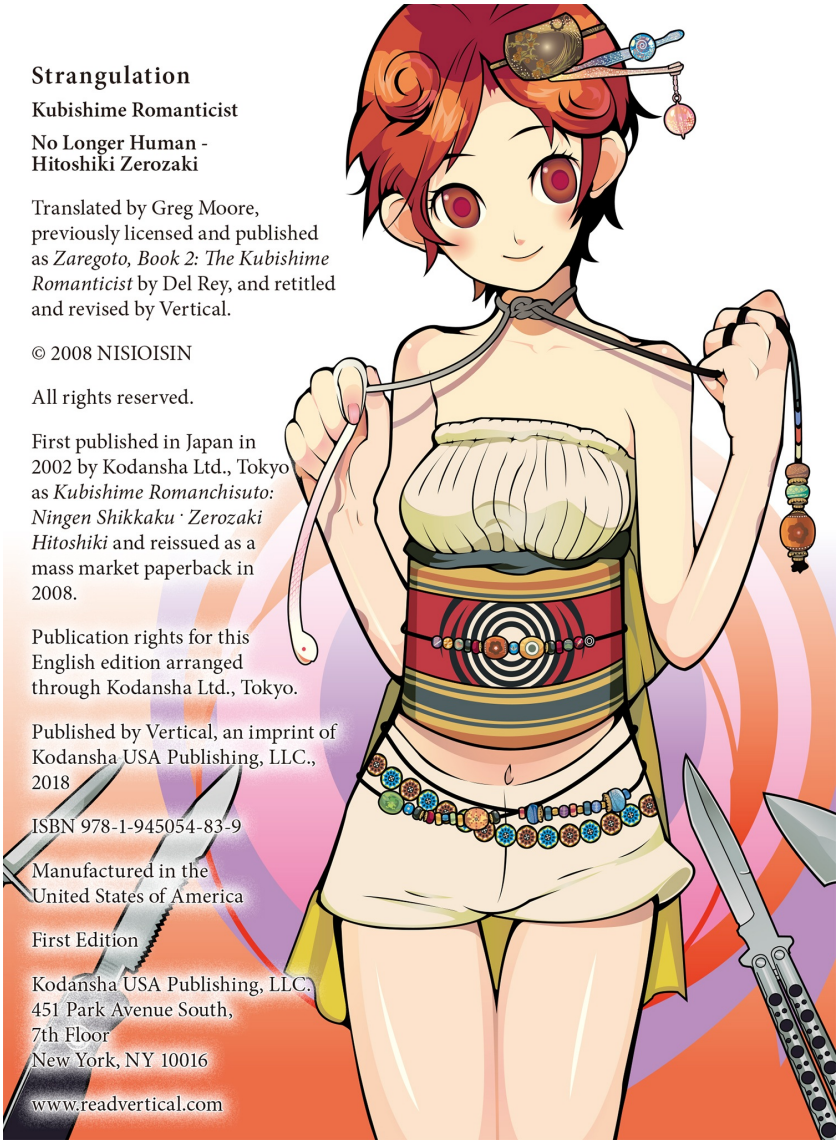

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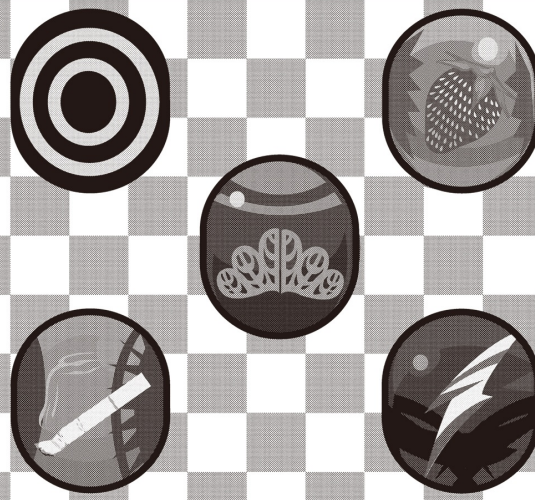

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*Editor's note: Each chapter title and its parenthetical gloss are homophonous in Japanese.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ME (narrator) — **Protagonist**

HITOSHIKI ZEROZAKI — **Serial Killer**

MUIMI ATEMIYA — **Classmate**

AKIHARU USAMI — **Classmate**

TOMOE EMOTO — **Classmate**

MIKOKO AOII — **Classmate**

MIIKO ASANO — **Neighbor**

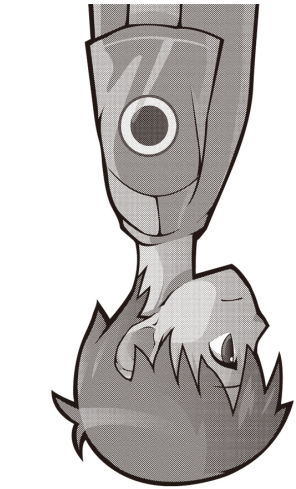
NEON SUZUNASHI — **Miiko Asano's Close Friend**

SASAKI SASA — **Detective**

KAZUHITO IKARUGA — **Detective**

TOMO KUNAGISA — **????**

JUN AIKAWA — **Humanity's Strongest Contractor**



ME (narrator)

Protagonist

Never having been loved is synonymous with never having lived.

—Lou Salomé

“Dreams don’t come true so easily.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I can barely handle reality.”

“So, in other words, all wishes are nearly unattainable.”

“Well, yeah, but not all nearly unattainable things are wishes.”

That’s a fragment of Zerozaki and me. A small sample of our conversation.

Even if you aren’t a nonsense user like me, anyone who harbors at least a soupçon of doubt about the world must have had a more or less similar experience: an exchange not influenced by cheaply supplied empathy, a pathetic desire to conform, or a miraculously ubiquitous synchronicity, but rather, a realm of mirroring that precedes senses and concepts of something “just being the way it is.”

There was no speck of realism, shard of necessity, segment of theorem, or clarification or clownification, not a single puff of congruence or words like allusion, no solution nor illusion, not a drop of cogency, not a shred of common sense, not a shadow of relevance, not a note of world harmony, and above all else, no romance.

The true comedy of it, however, is that it’s not as if “nothing happened.” It’s a comedy that breeds sorrow, demands compassion, and even has a poignant air.

I think he was irregular to begin with, untouchable. When you think of Zerozaki as being “on the other side of a watery surface,” that’s the only way to comprehend him. Otherwise, there’s

absolutely no point in trying to put his no-longer-human existence into words. Then again, regardless of what that may have been, was there any meaning to Zerozaki? Just as your nonsense user overwhelmingly lacks any meaning, expecting to come up with an external judgment about that serial killer is already an exemplarily misguided response wanting in analytic coherence. How do you go about describing that sensation, anyway? Akin to facing and exchanging words with oneself, that bizarre yet all too orthodox core of the tale?

Right.

So the encounter, itself, was farfetched.

Maybe it was a primal experience.

The very first word we heard.

A record to be termed our roots.

A past to be likened to association.

Vectors with identical origins and directions.

As if to precede the everyday.

As if reflected in a mirror.

That is to say, I think we were similar.

We were like two congruent figures that required no geometric proof. And we were both incredibly aware of this. From a subjective viewpoint, when we spoke to each other, I was, of course, myself, and Zerozaki was Zerozaki. Neither of us was anything more or less, as we were well aware. Yet we recognized each other, identified with each other. We shared a contradiction beyond the limitations

of language.

Hence the other side of reflecting waters.

Now let's introduce an innocent young girl.

Her, for instance.

Posit that she looks into a mirror for the first time. Surely she doesn't believe that the form before her is a mere reflection of the light. Instead, she imagines. Without fail, she creates: an endless world on the other side, separated by a single plane. She creates within her a world bearing an enormous contradiction□a perfect replica of "here" that nonetheless exists in an infinitely distant place.

The indulgence that pardons this contradiction isn't ignorance. It matters little which world is real and which is imaginary. If one is true, then the other is false, but if truth is in fact a deception, then both have equal value and are equally lacking in value.

That's what I think.

Zerozaki thought so, too.

In a sense, our relationship was very much like that. We realized we were the same, but we also understood that we were completely different.

"I think I could have become like you. That's why I feel a certain affinity."

"I doubt I could ever become like you. That's what I like about you."

Another sample of our conversation.

Truly nonsensical.

Ultimately.

I'm pretty sure we both despised ourselves. So we despised our own kin and kind. We hated ourselves, resented ourselves, and cursed ourselves so much that ironically, we were able to acknowledge each other.

I think it was something special.

Well, of course it was: me the passive bystander, and he the serial killer, opposites as though a mirror stood between us.

Only.

When that dreamer of a girl reaches out her graceful hand and touches the mirror even a little, probably all that's there is emptiness□a hollow, scattered feel. What she allowed to exist, someone else didn't. Moreover, the existence that she allowed didn't matter one bit to someone else, she's made to understand.

Probably at that moment, without exaggeration□

A world has broken for the girl.

So then, this is the tale of one world collapsing.

A world falling apart, without an ultramarine savant or a flaming-red strongest human needing to bring her hand down, but simply from "being there in a fashion." When a fallacy bearing a justified contradiction rains, simultaneously, on someone who's no longer human and someone who's a defective product, it all reduces to zero.

So then

Chapter 1
SPOTTY-CRACKED MIRROR
—(Purple Mirror)

HITOSHIKI ZEROZAKI
Serial Killer

0

My world is the coolest.

1

The private Rokumeikan University, located in Kinugasa, in Kita Ward of Kyoto, has a total of three cafeterias. Of the three, the Zonshinkan Chika Dining Hall (lovingly abbreviated to “Zonchi”) seems to be getting the most business. This is probably because it has an extensive menu and is right next door to a co-op bookstore.

That day, since I had no class during second period, I went there right after first period. I’d skipped breakfast that morning□I’d accidentally overslept by a whole hour□so I thought I might grab an early lunch.

“Man, it’s empty at this hour. Risky business,” I mumbled to myself, doubting at the same time that I was using the phrase “risky business” correctly. I picked up a tray.

Now, what to eat?

I’m no foodie, so usually I just eat whatever without much of a fuss. Be it spicy or sweet, I say bring it on. But lately things were just a little different. Only a month ago, I spent a hell of a week in a place where I was served three gourmet meals a day. As an aftereffect, my tongue was still stuck in Snootyville.

For a whole month since, nothing made me say, “Wow, this is delicious.” Every time I ate, it felt like something was missing, like some key ingredient was lacking.

It isn’t enough of a problem to merit being called a problem, but I sure was sick of feeling that way. As far as solutions went, I’d already thought of two.

The first was fairly simple: Just eat tasty food.

“Can’t hope for that in a school cafeteria…”

The suggestion was impossible to follow without heading back to a certain solitary isle that was as bizarre and abnormal as Rampo’s Panorama Island. I wouldn’t say I’m totally against the idea, but I certainly have my reservations.

“So that’s no good.”

Yes, I was talking to myself.

This left one other possible measure, and it was a strongarm tactic. It was the “beat the child who doesn’t listen” tactic. Most problems in the world are solved by either giving or taking.

I made my way to the donburi corner and placed an order.

“Excuse me. Large kimchee bowl, please. No rice.”

The lunch lady gave me a quizzical expression and said, “That’s just kimchee, son,” but she dished it out all the same. As if it were nothing, she plopped it in front of me with an admirable surfeit of professionalism.

A heaping, mountainous bowl of kimchee. I doubt there was a single tongue in this world tough enough to chow all that down and still preserve its sense of taste. I nodded with satisfaction, placed the bowl on my tray, and settled the bill.

The Zonchi was so empty that I could hardly decide where to sit. In another hour, the place would be filled up with students who had cut out of second period early. I was never a fan of crowds, so I

considered myself under a time limit. I took a seat in the corner.

“Down the hatch,” I muttered, and took the first bite…

It was awful.

I really had to eat a whole bowl of this stuff? Wasn’t this what was commonly known as suicidal behavior? What cruel fate had brought me to this pass? What had I done?

“Is this some sort of rough justice?”

I guess they also say reap what you sow.

From then on, I wielded my chopsticks in silence. If I kept on talking to myself, people would start thinking I was a weirdo. Besides, it’s poor table manners to talk while you’re eating.

“…”

And then.

Just as I hit my limit not just the tip of my tongue but my entire head had gone numb, I didn’t know what the hell I was doing, or, for that matter, who I was, or what the word who meant, and even what the word meant meant

“Yo.”

She sat in the chair across from me.

“Pull that tray back a little, will you?” she said. Then she pushed mine toward me and placed hers in the newly opened space. Her tray was laden with a plate of spaghetti carbonara, some tuna-and-kelp salad, and a bonus fruit dessert for a grand total of three dishes.

Oh, how bourgeois.

“…?”

I looked to my right, then to my left. The cafeteria was still empty.

You could practically call it deserted. So why had she decided to have her spaghetti carbonara directly across from me? Probably some kind of dare.

“Oh my God, what is that?! It’s all kimchee!” she exclaimed at the shocking sight of my lunch. “Wow! You’re eating an entire bowl of kimchee!”

She was wide-eyed, her hands up in the air like she was doing a banzai cheer. Maybe that was what she was doing, or maybe she was surrendering. There was also the possibility that she was just Muslim. Any of these was fine by me, but in reality, she was probably just surprised.

Her shoulder-length hair had a reddish tint. It was done up in a sort of bob, or maybe a bowl-cut. Her clothes were nothing out of the ordinary. Plain, following the style of so much of the Rokumeikan student body. The moment she sat down, she looked much shorter; it seemed she was wearing extra-tall London boots.

She had a young face, so I couldn’t tell if she was my senior or a peer. Judging by her demeanor, she could be my junior, but that was impossible since I was a freshman.

“Hey. Y’know, how about responding, so I don’t get lonely and stuff.” She stared at me with puppy-dog eyes.

“Right,” I finally said. “Who are you?”

I was pretty sure this was our first encounter. But over the past month, I’d learned that the pocket of space known as a college has an abundance of curiously friendly people. They strike up conversations with you like you’ve been buddies for ten years even though you’ve never seen them before in your life. For a guy like me who’s bad at remembering people’s faces, it’s extremely mortifying. Surely this girl was another one of those types; fearing the hassle of having to deal with a club invitation or, worse, some religious thing, I went ahead and raised the above question.

Doing so launched her into an over-the-top shocked pose.

“Hwa?!” she said. “Oh my God! You mean you forgot? You’ve forgotten? You freaking forgot?! Ikkun, that’s so cold!”

Oops. Judging from her reaction, this wasn’t our first encounter.

“Ohhh. I am shocked,” she lamented. “But what are you gonna do, right? Yeah, nothing, I guess. You’ve got a bad memory, after all. Well, might as well introduce myself again.” Her palms turned towards me, she flashed a full-faced grin. “Mikoko Aoii, at your service!”

“…”

I was dealing with a painful character.

First encounter or not, that was, to be sure, my first impression of Mikoko Aoii.

2

Her story was simple. Mikoko and I were classmates. Not only were we in the same orientation course, but we were also taking the same foreign-language class. We'd met face-to-face a number of times and were together for the incoming students' camp before Golden Week. We'd even been paired up before in English.

"Man… Hearing just that makes me seem like a total nut for not remembering you."

"I think you are a total nut!" Mikoko laughed lightheartedly. To be able to so cheerfully after someone had entirely forgotten your existence took a special kind of nerve. I figured she must be a pretty nice girl. "Normally, I'd find it pretty disturbing if someone forgot me," she said. "Or rather, I'd be pissed. But that's just how you are, right? Like, you don't forget the stuff that's really important, but you forget ordinary stuff."

"Well, I can't argue with that."

She was exactly right. One time I even forgot if I was right or left-handed and found myself in quite a bind while I was having a meal. If you'd allow a little digression, the truth had been that I was ambidextrous.

"Okay, and what's happening with you?" I asked. "Why aren't you in class?"

"Class? Well…"

She seemed strangely happy for some reason. I got the feeling that was her default setting, but I didn't know because I couldn't remember. Either way, it was hard to be put off by this smiley-faced girl.

"I'm playing hooky," she admitted.

“Freshmen really ought to go to class.”

“Aw, come on, it’s boring. Totally boring. What was it again? Oh, yeah, economics. It’s just a nonstop stream of jargon. And it’s almost like math. I’m a humanities person! And you’re skipping class, too.”

“I don’t have one right now.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Fridays, I only have a first period and a fifth period.”

She flung her hands wildly in the air again. “Doesn’t that kind of suck? That’s like six hours of boredom.”

“I don’t dislike boredom.”

“Hm, I thought boredom was about disliking a chunk of time, but different strokes, I guess.” She began winding the spaghetti around her fork as she spoke. Unable to get it all on her spoon, it soon became a matter of trial and error. I reckoned it would be a while before the food actually reached her mouth, but then she put the fork down and switched to chopsticks. This girl really knew when and how to quit.

“Say…” I ventured.

“Hm? What-what?”

“There are tons of open seats.”

“Yeah. I think it’ll fill up pretty soon, though.”

“But it’s empty now, isn’t it?”

“You said it. Something wrong with that?”

“I wanna eat alone, so let’s move along now, honey,” I wanted to say. But then I saw her smile□a vulnerable smile like she couldn’t even imagine being utterly rejected□and even I had to take pity.

“Nah…nothing.”

“Hm? You’re a weird guy.” She gave me the pouty lips. “Ah, but if you weren’t weird, you wouldn’t be you. Weirdness is like your identity.”

I couldn’t help but feel like I was being inadvertently insulted. But then again, it wasn’t as bad as completely forgetting someone you’d regularly interacted with for a whole month. So I let it slide and focused on my kimchee.

“Ikkun, you’re a kimchee fan?”

“No, not particularly.”

“But there’s a ton of it. Not even Koreans eat that much in one sitting.”

“Well, I have my reasons…” As I spoke, I ferried some to my mouth; more than half of my meal remained in my bowl. “Not very interesting ones, but still.”

“Reasons?”

“Try to figure it out yourself first.”

“Huh? That…hmm. Let’s see…”

Mikoko crossed her arms and began to try and infer my rationale. Of course, figuring out a set of circumstances that required eating an entire bowl of kimchee wasn’t exactly easy. After just a few moments of pondering, she let her arms drop back down. She really was quick to throw in the towel.

“Oh, yeah, by the way, I had a question for you,” she said. “I think this might be a good opportunity. May I?”

“Uh, sure.”

Wasn’t the phrase good opportunity usually for something that came up by chance? As far as I could tell, she’d deliberately sat in front of me.

Or maybe that was beside the point.

She was wearing the same smile when she posed her question. “Ikkun, you know how you didn’t come to school for a while in the beginning of April? Why was that?”

“Ah…” My chopsticks stopped moving. The bits of kimchee they held plopped back into the bowl. “Um, well…”

I must have had a troubled look on my face because Mikoko was quick to start waving her hands around frantically. “Oh, if it’s hard to talk about, don’t worry. Just wondering, that’s all. It’s like, Unsolved Mysteries Featuring Mikoko.”

“No, it’s not hard to talk about. It’s simple, really. It’s just that I went on a little trip. For about a week.”

“A trip?” She blinked at me like a little forest animal. Her expressions were always easy to read, which made it easy for me to talk to her. I guess Mikoko was a good listener. “What sort of trip? Where’d you go?”

“Out to some deserted island in the Sea of Japan, kind of by accident.”

“By accident?”

“Yeah. A major accident. Anyway, that’s how I got myself into this kimchee-eating situation.”

She tilted her head, which was probably a natural response. But I am a fundamentally lazy person, so I couldn’t be bothered to explain all the details. Or rather, just how the hell would I?

“Anyway, just a trip. Nothing particularly deep.”

“Huh. You don’t say.”

“What did you think it was?”

“Oh, nothing…” She blushed a bit. “I just thought maybe, uh, you hurt yourself somehow and had an extended stay at the hospital or

something.”

How and why such an idea would occur to her was a mystery to me, but then again, there weren’t many plausible explanations for someone suddenly taking a week off just after starting college. At least, it was a more likely reason than “I had gone on a little trip.”

“I see. Sort of like a delayed graduation trip.”

“Yeah, something like that. I couldn’t get a reservation, so it ended up eating into April,” I said with a shrug, but of course the facts were totally different. To begin with, “graduation” was something I hadn’t experienced since elementary school, let alone a graduation trip. But all of those circumstances would require a pointlessly long explanation and weren’t anything that I wanted to talk about, so I just went with her interpretation.

“Hmm…” She gave a sort of half-convinced expression. “So did you go alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Gotcha.”

Then, just like that, the cheerful smile was back as though all of her confusion had dissipated. She really didn’t put on any façades, or rather, was so straightforward with her emotions that you had to envy her.

Envy her…

No.

I didn’t, not in particular.

“So, Mikoko… Why are you really here?”

“Huh?”

“You have something to say, I assume? I mean, considering you came and sat right here when there’s a whole roomful of empty chairs.”

“Hmm.” She narrowed her eyes and lowered her gaze a bit, down to my chest. “I can’t sit with you unless I’ve got something specific to say to you?”

“Huh?” It was my turn to tilt my head.

She continued, “I mean…am I bothering you? I just saw you when I was walking by, so I thought maybe we could eat together.”

“Oh, I see.”

In other words, she wanted someone to talk to during lunch? I was the type who preferred doing personal things, like eating, alone, but there were plenty of people who viewed mealtime and talk time as one and the same. Surely Mikoko was one of them. Yet, having decided to skip class on a whim, she was unable to find a lunchmate and so struck up a conversation with the first acquaintance she happened to see me.

“Well, if that’s all it is, it’s fine by me,” I assured her.

“Thanks. That’s a relief. I wouldn’t know what to do if you said no.”

“What would you do?”

“Hm? Yeah. Maybe this.” Pretending to hold the edges of her tray in both hands, she made to swivel her arms in the opposite direction. “And that.”

“I see…”

Even if she was just joking, I was a little relieved I had refrained from saying no. I wouldn’t have put such a reaction past her, in reality. Someone who expressed happiness so freely might express anger just as freely.

“Well, I guess I’m free anyway. As long as you just want to talk,” I said.

“Thanks.”

“So, what are we talking about?”

“Oh, umm…”

As I prompted her, she began anxiously scraping her chopsticks together. She was probably trying to think of a topic.

I may have forgotten who she was, but in the past month it seemed like she’d at least managed to grasp the surface of my personality. So just what kind of topic would she broach with me? Me, who was so ignorant, and so lacking in common sense, that I used to think soccer was baseball played with your feet? I was kind of interested to find out as if it were happening to someone else.

Mikoko clapped her hands as if she had thought of something. “Don’t you think the world’s gone crazy?” she said.

“Huh? In what way?”

“I mean…er, you know, the prowler. Even you must know about it.”

Even you.

The phrase was pretty enraging□except that I had no idea who the hell “the prowler” was.

Don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot! Of course I know! An angry outburst like that would be fairly justified, but Shut up! How am I supposed to know what that is, stupid?! just didn’t have the same ring to it.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Ikkun?” she asked.

“Ah, nothing. What’s ‘the prowler’?”

Obviously I wasn’t looking for the dictionary definition, one who prowls. She gawked at me in amazement.

“You’re kidding, right? Is this a joke? Ikkun, it’s been all over the news. There’s no way you could have missed this if you live in Kyoto.”

“There’s no TV in my room, and I don’t get the paper either.”

“What about the Internet?”

“Oh, I don’t have a computer. Don’t really use the ones on campus much either.”

“Oh my God, Ikkun is a caveman!” exclaimed Mikoko, sounding almost impressed. “Is it some sort of ethical policy?”

“Maybe it is, in a sense. How do I put it… I don’t like having things.”

“Cooool! You’re like an ancient philosopher! Wow!”

She clapped her hands with joy. I seriously doubted I would have gotten the same reaction if she knew it was actually for a practical and completely lame reason. My room was just too small.

I mean, newspapers take up a lot of space.

“When you say ‘if you live in Kyoto,’ do you mean this ‘prowler’ thing is going on here?”

“Yeah, that’s right! It’s made a pretty big splash. ‘Panic in the Old Capital!’ Some places have even called off field trips.”

“Wow…too bad for them.”

“Six people have been murdered! And it’s still going on! With no known suspects!” She was all riled up, and there was a hint of excitement in her voice. “He stabs them with a knife and slashes up their guts and stuff! Freaky, huh?”

“…”

Let’s set aside the fact that we were eating. After all, I was partly responsible for the fact that the conversation had veered in this direction. But what did it say about this girl that she was able to discuss murder with such absolute glee?

It’s scary how detached people can be.

“Six people, huh? Is that a lot?”

“Yeah, it’s a lot! It’s a hell of a lot!” She almost sounded boastful as if she were the one doing the killing. “Maybe not overseas, but serial killings are rare in Japan! It’s pretty sensational, you know.”

“Huh. So that’s why there are patrol cars circling around all over the place.”

“Yeah. In Shinkyogoku, there are even riot police. Makes me think of the Gion Festival.” She chuckled to herself for some reason.

“Wow, go figure. I didn’t know anything about this.”

As I nodded along, somehow I thought, Kunagisa would definitely get a kick out of this. Kunagisa, full name Tomo Kunagisa, one of my few friends, that is to say, my only friend, is a nineteen-year-old electronic and mechanical engineering professional shut-in of the mysterious variety, with blue hair and a passionate interest in collecting information on just these types of incidents. Unlike me, she isn’t constantly in the dark about what’s going on in the world. As an information-gathering expert, she was probably well aware of this prowler case without my having to say anything about it. In fact, she might already be taking action.

“So when did it start?”

“Around the beginning of May, maybe? I think that’s right. Why?”

“Oh, I was just asking.”

I put the last piece of kimchee in my mouth. My tongue, or rather the entire inside of my mouth, was completely mangled. I would probably never take food for granted or say “this tastes bad” again. If you thought about it, the fact that a single bowl of kimchee could so easily destroy my principles didn’t say much for my taste buds. Or maybe it was just a matter of mood.

“Well, I’m done. See you again sometime.” I put down my chopsticks and began to get up from my seat.

“Ah! Hold on! Hold on, will you?! Where are you going?!” Mikoko

scrambled to stop me. “Wait a minute, Ikkun!”

“What do you mean, ‘Where am I going’? I’m finished eating so I figured maybe I’d drop by the bookstore.”

“I’m not done!” I looked at her tray. Indeed, more than half of her food remained.

“But I am.”

“Don’t make me sad. Stay with me till I’m finished.”

“Why should I have to do a pointless thing like that?”…is exactly the kind of thing I’m not tough enough to say. I’m more of the go-with-the-flow type.

“Okay. I’m free now anyway.” I didn’t have anything urgent to do, and it wasn’t like I was full yet. I figured I might as well put some rice in my stomach while I was there. “Wait a minute, I’m gonna go buy something,” I told Mikoko.

Going through the register the wrong way (which was against the rules), I took a look at the menu on the wall, wondering whether I should order the beef bowl. Geez, it was more expensive than Yoshinoya. Maybe something else was the way to go…

“Kimchee again?” the lady at the counter interrupted with a bright smile as I was trying to decide.

“Yes.”

Oops. I’d nodded.

“No use crying over spilt milk…”

Or wait, was this more of a “hindsight-is-always-twenty-twenty” situation?

A few dozen seconds later, with another heaping bowl of kimchee in hand (this time the lunch lady had given me a little extra), I sat back down in front of Mikoko.

“What the hell? Am I supposed to make some quip here?” she said.

“Don’t worry about it… So, what were we talking about?”

“Hm? Uh, what was it? I forgot.”

“Gotcha. Well, then you want to talk about class?”

She firmly shook her head.

“Why not? There were some things I didn’t really get in first period today, so I was thinking maybe we could go over it together. It’s a required class for freshmen, so you must have gone, right? If you ask me, the professor’s inability to explain things properly is to blame, but what do you think?”

“What do I think?! I think that there isn’t a boy alive who brings that up to a girl when there isn’t even a test coming up!”

I was only kidding, but she seemed seriously put off by it. “What’s the matter? You don’t like studying?”

“Nobody likes studying.”

“That sounds debatable to me. But if you hate studying, why did you come to college?”

“Ah, that’s a taboo question. If you ask that, it’s all over. I mean… everyone’s like that, right?”

It seemed I had inadvertently touched a soft spot, and she suddenly seemed a bit melancholy. Come to think of it, someone once said Japanese universities aren’t a place for people who want to study. College is just a time to prepare for entering society, and so on. The same woman had gone on to assert that in Japan, mandatory education extended up to college and that university students were on the same intellectual level as grade school kids.

“Hmm,” Mikoko reacted to my secondhand remarks. “But that means we’re already on the intellectual level of university students when we’re in grade school. A country can be an economic power even if young people who’d go to college for no reason fill its

ranks? If you think about it that way, Japan is amazing."

"Heh, that's one way to put it."

"Do you like studying?"

I shrugged.

Of course not.

In fact, I hated it.

"But it's not bad for killing time," I said. "Or as an escape from reality, rather."

"Usually studying is the reality."

Mikoko exhaled a sigh. Then, as if shifting her focus back to her meal, she silently picked at her salad for a while.

Hmm. Was a plate of spaghetti, a large salad, and a dessert a normal-sized meal for a girl who was just under twenty? I didn't know anybody fit to use as a standard for comparison□they were either incredibly finicky, ridiculously gluttonous, or always fasting or something□and therefore couldn't decide. Since Mikoko was neither too slim nor the opposite, perhaps it was, for her at least, an appropriate amount.

"Umm, it's hard to eat with you staring at me like that," she complained.

"Oh, sorry."

"S'okay."

She resumed eating.

When she was nearly done, she began looking my way in a probing sort of fashion. Really, she had been peeping up at me every so often the whole time, but now she was obvious about it all of a sudden, making eyes at me like there was something she wanted to tell me.

And indeed, that proved to be an accurate guess. As if she'd made up her mind at last, she put down her chopsticks without finishing her dessert. She gave a bit of a playful smile as she leaned her body forward, bringing her face close to mine.

"So, Ikkun."

"Yeah…"

"The truth is, I may or may not have a favor to ask you."

"You don't."

"I do." She leaned back again in her seat. "Are you the kind of guy who might be free tomorrow?"

"If you define free as not having any plans, then I'm more apt to say yes than no."

"You're kind of hard to follow."

"That's just how I am," I responded through my kimchee. "To put it more simply□I'm a free dude."

"Really? You're free? Oh, good!"

Mikoko pressed her palms together with a look of true joy. Bringing someone such happiness and satisfaction just by not having plans on a Saturday seemed a bit much, though.

More importantly…

This didn't look good.

I had the distinct feeling I was about to get dragged into something.

"I see, I see, so if I'm free, something good happens to you, huh? One hand washes the other. It's also kind of like the food chain. A magnificent circuit, if you will."

"Yeah. Anyway, if you're free tomorrow, I was hoping we could meet up!"

She wasn't even listening to me. Her palms still pressed together, she tilted them to the side a bit as if to emphasize her request. This was accompanied by a dimpled smile. It was such an earnest, imploring pose that it almost felt like foul play. There was scarcely a male lifeform alive that wouldn't have surrendered to it. They would want to surrender.

"I don't wanna," I refused nonetheless, not being remotely cute myself.

"Wha! Why?" she practically yelled at me. "You're free, right? You'll be taking a break?"

"Well, yeah. But it's like I said, I don't dislike boredom. Sometimes people like to just spend the day doing nothing, okay? Everyone feels like that sometimes. Everyone wants to escape the hustle and bustle of the world sometimes, to free themselves of the hassle of dealing with other people. Everybody has a right to time to contemplate their own lives. I do happen to have more of it than is usual."

"But-but-but! How can you just refuse without even hearing me out?! That's crazy! It's like a bunch of eighth graders forming a band, but they all end up playing bass!"

It was a pretty great analogy.

On close inspection, she was about to cry. That is to say, tears were already brimming in the corners of her eyes. This was not a desirable situation.

I looked around. It was about time for the cafeteria to start filling up, and there were more and more students. At this point, I wanted to avoid standing out (by, say, making a relatively attractive girl cry) as much as possible. But come on, who cries just from one little rejection?

"Hey, just calm down. I'll hear you out. Come on, have some kimchee."

"Okay," she said, sniffling.

Doing as I suggested, Mikoko placed some kimchee in her mouth. “Fwa!” she peeped, and then the tears really started flowing. It seemed she wasn’t much for stimulants (which I kind of knew).

“Ahh, hot!” she cried out.

“Well, it is kimchee. It wouldn’t be kimchee if it wasn’t spicy.” They say there’s also sugar-preserved kimchee, but I always went with spicy, so I had never seen it. I wouldn’t mind if I never did.

“Ohh, you’re terrible. You’re so mean… Now, what were we talking about?”

“That prowling killer?”

“No! We were talking about tomorrow!”

Bam! she slammed her hand on the table. It looked like she was seriously a little mad now. Maybe I had gone too far, I reflected.

“Umm, do you know Emoto?” she asked.

“Whether I know her or not, I don’t remember her.”

“She’s in our orientation course. Her hair is like this.” Mikoko stuck her fists to the sides of her ears, but even with this striking pose, “Emoto” and her hairstyle remained stubbornly beyond the grasp of my imagination.

“She’s a pretty noticeable girl. She’s always wearing shiny clothes.”

“Huh. Well, I don’t really look at people much. What’s her full name?”

“Tomoe Emoto. That’s the tomo from ‘wisdom’ and the e from ‘blessing.’”

Interesting name. Sounded like it could do a headstand and start running around upside down. It felt like it rang a bell, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I didn’t want to just toss out some answer like, Oh yeah, that girl. She’s the one with the contact lenses, right?

Mikoko might throw it right back in my face and say, “I tricked you! There’s nobody like that in our class! Ahaha, looks like the pants are on the other leg now! Nya-nya-nya!” And then the egg would be on my face, my fraudulence exposed. Well, not that she’d ever do that.

“Her nickname is Tomo.”

“That’s not gonna work for me.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“No reason. Just my own personal thing.” I shook my head. “Sorry. I don’t remember her at all.”

“Figures,” Mikoko said, laughing. “But if you didn’t remember me, I guess it goes without saying that you wouldn’t remember her. If you did remember her, I’d feel a little hurt.”

I didn’t quite follow her reasoning, but if my poor memory helped her avoid feeling terrible, maybe it wasn’t totally worthless. Something definitely seemed off with the logic there, though.

“Well, okay. How about Atemiya? Muimi Atemiya? I call her Muimi.”

“Another classmate?”

Mikoko nodded. “Then there’s Akiharu Usami. Akiharu is a guy, so you must remember him.”

“My memory functions in a gender-neutral environment.”

“But you sure don’t seem like a feminist…”

She let out a big, unintentionally exaggerated sigh. It was like I had done something wrong. But it wasn’t my fault but my faulty memory’s.

“Anyway, Tomo, Muimi, Akiharu, and me, Mikoko. Four total. We’re all gathering tomorrow night for a little drinking.”

“Huh. What’s the occasion?”

“It’s Tomo’s birthday!” For some reason Mikoko seemed a tad boastful. It was hard to deny her adorableness as she sat there with her hands on her hips, chest stuck out. “May fourteenth! Happy twentieth!”

If this Tomo was a classmate, that meant she was a freshman too. Maybe she had entered college a year late. Or maybe she’d returned from overseas like me. It didn’t really matter.

“I’m only nineteen, by the way. My birthday’s April twentieth.”

“Huh,” I said. I didn’t really care.

Mikoko continued, “Umm, so anyway, tomorrow’s Tomo’s birthday, so we figured we’d throw a really light, casual kind of party with just four people.”

“Huh. Seems awfully lean and mean for a birthday.”

“Yeah, well. We all like the rowdy atmosphere thing, but nobody wanted there to be a ton of people, so what are you gonna do?”

“Ah. Then four people is pretty appropriate.”

“Huh?” Mikoko looked surprised.

“A fifth person would throw off the balance.”

“Huh? What?”

“Well, say hi to everyone for me. Happy Birthday to~ You.”

“It’s not my birthday! Hey, wait, don’t just get up and leave! You don’t know the other half of the story yet!”

“Well, they say knowing is only half the battle…”

“That’s not what that means!”

She grabbed me by the sleeve as I started to leave and forced me to sit back down. But even if the conversation was only half-over, I

could more or less tell what was coming next.

“Okay then. So now you’re going to tell me to partake in this drinking party…or birthday party, rather.”

“Gah! Wow, that’s exactly right.” Mikoko flung up her hands in surprise, but this time it reeked of phoniness. Maybe it wasn’t that she didn’t put on any façades and was instead just a lousy actress. “Amazing, it’s like you’ve got ESP or something, Ikkun.”

“Let’s not go there. Not a good subject.” I took a breath and asked, “How did all this come about? I don’t even know these people.”

“You do! They’re your classmates.”

Ah, right.

Maybe I had amnesia. I was never good at remembering people, but lately it was getting particularly bad. Those three classmates aside, there wasn’t a single person at all of Rokumeikan University of whom I had a clear picture.

But there was a more likely explanation.

That it was simply the result of my apathy toward people.

It had nothing to do with my brain’s functionality.

It wasn’t defective.

It wasn’t missing anything.

This was just about me being broken from the outset.

“Could it be that I’ve forgotten and I’m actually good friends with them? Even I wouldn’t forget my friends, though.”

Mikoko’s expression grew a little sad. “I don’t think that’s the case,” she said. “You probably haven’t spoken much. I mean, you’ve always got this narrow-eyed scowl as if you’re thinking really hard about something or contemptuous. Even now. It makes you kind of hard to approach. It’s like you’ve got a wall in front of you. Or your

AT field is fully operational. And in spite of all that, you always sit right in the middle of the classroom."

I wanted her to leave me the hell alone. I wanted to tell her not to bother talking to me if that was how she felt. But I didn't.

I finished my kimchee. As it turned out, two bowls ended up being pretty excessive, and I felt too full. I probably wouldn't be having kimchee again for a long time.

"But you and I are friends," Mikoko claimed.

"Are we?"

"Yes!" She slammed the table again, with both hands this time. It seemed she had a habit of hitting nearby things when she got emotional. I'd have to remember to stay out of range of those slender arms if I was going to make fun of her. In other words, I needed a way to make fun of her while staying out of range. Maybe it was better to pick on her over the phone.

Wait, why was I scheming to piss her off?

"And so, Ikkun, naturally I tell my friends about you sometimes."

"I guess."

"And my friends think, Man, for a guy who's always got such a crummy face, he seems kind of cool."

"I guess it's possible."

"So it's not so strange that they would want to try being friends with someone who seems kind of cool, even if he is a weirdo."

"Yeah, I guess we all have temptations."

"So that's what I'm saying."

"What is?"

"That."

She peered at me with eager, expectant eyes. I pretended to drink my tea to escape her gaze. A single cup sure wasn't going to be enough to revive my paralyzed mouth, though.

"Huh… I understand," I said.

"You do?!"

"It's a good opportunity and all, so I think I'll go spend the night at my parents' place tomorrow."

"Don't be making last-minute plans! You didn't even go home during Golden Week!"

She slammed the table again. I was a little disturbed that she knew what I'd done for Golden Week, but then again, I must have told her and forgotten.

"But you know, it's almost Mother's Day and stuff," I explained.

"That was last week! And besides, you're not the kind of guy who'd go out of his way to honor his parents!"

That was rather harsh. And even if she was right, did she believe that a nineteen-year-old guy who wouldn't go out of his way for his parents would be any nicer to someone who was just a classmate? Maybe she was so worked up she didn't realize what she was saying anymore.

"Come on, I'm begging you. I already told them I'd bring you. I'll lose face."

"It seems like there's a misunderstanding here, so let me clear things up□I'm not the kind of guy you can have fun talking to. They say I've got about as much pep as a murky cloud settling into dregs."

"Wow, that's as disappointing as hearing about two budding young authors, only one's poison ivy and the other got eaten by tent caterpillars." She looked a little somber as she chewed her lip. "Please, Ikkun. Do it as a favor to me. I know it's selfish of me, but hey, I'll even pay for drinks."

“Sorry, I’m not a drinker.”

This was true.

“Why not?”

“I once drank a whole bottle of vodka in one go.” I didn’t dare tell her how the story ended, but at any rate, ever since then I had sworn off alcohol. I may not be such a smart guy, but I’m not so dumb that I don’t learn from experience.

“Wow, not even a Russian would do that.” Mikoko was truly surprised. “I see… So you can’t drink. Hm, now what?”

She immersed herself in thought once again. It seemed she had a firm understanding of what it was like for a nondrinker to show up at a drinking party. Perhaps she was a lightweight herself in that regard.

Nevertheless…

I wasn’t so cold-blooded that I felt nothing for this girl sitting before me who looked so deeply troubled.

Dammit… I get dragged into things so easily. Going along with something out of pity was one thing. But getting dragged in just because the situation presented itself was totally lame.

“Fine. As long as you’re okay with me just sitting in the middle of the room scowling.”

“Hmm, I guess that would be an awful bother for you, but I think… Wait, Ikkun, you mean you’ll come?!”

She shot her body forward. Maybe it’s a rude analogy, but she was like a puppy with a treat being dangled in front of it. A cat would approach it with some caution, suspecting a trap, but Mikoko was completely unguarded. She may have physically resembled a cat, but she was definitely more like a dog in personality.

“Is it really okay? Will you really come?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’m free anyway.”

Even I was a little appalled by my own bluntness and wondered if I couldn’t have put it a little more nicely. “Waaah! Thank you!” she exclaimed with an innocent smile all the same.

I replied, “You’re welcome,” and downed the rest of my tea. At some point she had finished her dessert as well, so this time I stood up from my chair in earnest.

“Ah, wait a sec, Ikkun. May I have your phone number? I’ll call you.”

“Hm? Ah…” I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. “Uh, it’s…I forgot.”

“Figures. Then I’ll give you mine, so dial me.”

I entered her number as told and made the call. A ringtone sounded from her little bag. David Bowie. She was pretty cosmopolitan in taste, and I probably shouldn’t say despite appearances.

“Okay, got it. Hey, Ikkun, your phone doesn’t have a strap.”

“Yeah. I don’t like that girly stuff.”

“Are straps girly?”

“Well, I’m no expert or anything, but they’re definitely not very manly.”

“Mmm, guess not,” she agreed with difficulty.

“Well, then.” I stepped away from my seat with my tray. “See you tomorrow, Mikoko.”

“Yep! Don’t you forget about me again!”

She gave me a big wave, to which I responded with a small one as I made my way out of the cafeteria. After returning my tray and silverware, I headed straight to the co-op bookstore. Of course, being a university bookstore, its selection consisted mainly of

academic texts and not recreational reading. On the plus side, however, there was a ten-percent discount on everything—and for some reason (seriously, why?) an unusually large selection of magazines—so it got fairly crowded.

I made my way to the novels section and picked one out.

Huh?

Something occurred to me.

“Wait a minute. Did Mikoko always call me ‘Ikkun’?”

Now that I looked back on our encounter, the nickname sounded quite refreshing. She’d used it so naturally that I hadn’t even noticed—but I’d never have tolerated such an overly familiar one.

I thought about it for a moment but couldn’t remember. I had no specific memory of her calling me that before, but then again, I didn’t remember her not calling me that, either. I’d retained hardly any memory of Mikoko, herself, let alone such details.

“Whatever.”

Either was fine by me.

Satisfied with that, I began reading the novel inside the store.

Yup.

No big deal.

It wasn’t like anyone was going to die because of it.

All was well with the world.

Even if the heavens were empty.

3

In life, what counts as a fatal wound?

Getting decapitated.

Yeah, obviously that's one.

Crushing someone's heart.

Again, obvious.

Destroying someone's brain.

Naturally.

Stopping their breathing.

That's another good method.

But I'm not referring to such trivialities in saying "fatal wound" here.

I mean an impact on your life so intense, so devastating, that you fall into a state where you're human but inhuman, you're a person but can't live, you're alive but are dead. It means getting sucked in whole and being ground to bits by a dilemma precisely because you're endowed with reason.

A fatal wound.

In other words, failing.

The key here is that even after failing, it goes on.

The world is brutally tepid.

It's so kind that it's cruel. It's a devil's paradise.

To put it plainly, even when they make big mistakes, human beings don't die.

They can't die, I should say.

Right, you don't die.

You only suffer.

You simply suffer in agony.

And it goes on. Forever, endlessly.

It just goes on, senselessly.

Life isn't a video game, not because there's no reset button, but because there's no Game Over. Though it's been "over" for ages, tomorrow shows up anyway. Even when night falls, morning comes again. When winter ends, spring rolls in. How wonderful life is.

It's an absolute paradox—even though it's a fatal wound, you can't die. It's like asking what a person sees when he looks backward while traveling faster than the speed of light. An unthinkable question.

Even though your potential to be you has long since been cut off, it goes on. You start anew as often as you like. You reset your life again and again.

But it's like making one shoddy copy after another, and each time you start over, your "self" deteriorates a little.

Eventually you get to thinking:

Am I really me, or

did I become

something else

long ago?

Have I devolved?

Just as a subjective point of view can't ever become a third party, you can't become your own spectator.

And that's what's truly fatal.

"In other words, it's all about spirit…"

Muttering, and turning over these fruitless thoughts, I was trying the new McDonald's burger at the same time.

The 525-yen value combo.

The kimchee must have worked, because my sense of taste had returned to normal. A McDonald's hamburger tasted pretty luscious again. Right, as long as I was Japanese, it didn't do to be unable to enjoy McDonald's.

The time was half past seven in the evening.

The place: Shijokawara-machi, Shinkyogoku Street.

After fifth period, I'd decided to check out for myself the riot police Mikoko had mentioned, and my feet had taken me this far in an effort to kill time.

Next to the tray with the hamburger on it was a magazine. What they call a weekly infozine. I had bought it at the co-op, and on the cover it said, Feature Story: Jack the Ripper Revived in the Sorcery Capital!

"Terrible sensibility."

That catastrophic sensibility, which I found pleasing, was the second reason I'd bought it. The first, needless to say, was the fact that it featured the "prowler" incidents Mikoko had mentioned.

I shoved two fries in my mouth, added a straw as well, and sucked down some cola. I started flipping through the weekly. The first page was set with an all too vivid picture of a corpse as the background, and in big, Gothic letters, it read: A Serial Killer Has Kyoto Trembling!

Ominous indeed.

“So they let you print such photos…”

Mumbling, I flipped through the pages. I had already scanned a few times the gist of what the article described, so I at least knew something about the crime spree now, if not everything.

The media had dubbed it the “Kyoto Serial Prowler Case.” Not the most imaginative name in the world, but then again, maybe the case didn’t need one. Still, the word prowler hardly seemed to suit the perpetrator. I always thought of a prowler as someone who stalks people on the street and causes them harm. But in this case the culprit was luring the victims into desolate areas, killing them with a sharp blade, and finally disassembling the corpses. It seemed like psychotic murderer was a better term than prowler. It definitely resembled the Jack the Ripper murders.

“Six people now, huh? Someone’s been busy.”

Muttering again, I stuffed the magazine back into my bag.

Yes, six. Just as Mikoko had said, six people in less than two weeks’ time was quite a death toll. It was probably unprecedented. By the third murder, police were dispatched all over the city for surveillance purposes. Even the riot police were out in force, but the murders went on as if the killer were laughing at the cops.

The victims had no apparent connection. They were young and old, male and female: no mercy. The police (and everyone else, for that matter) seemed to regard it as an indiscriminate spree.

So the sixth victim probably wouldn’t be the last.

It would go on. As long as the serial killer remained on the loose—or until he decided, perhaps on a whim, to stop of his own volition—it would happen again. Even tonight. Maybe it was happening as I sat there.

“Though, in the end, it’s nonsense…”

I stared out at Shinkyogoku Street through the McDonald’s

entrance.

It was the same scenery as always. Fewer tourists and students on field trips, but it was still pretty crowded□a lot of kids with dyed hair were milling around now. I suppose you could call it its own sort of territoriality.

Nobody.

Absolutely nobody walking along the street seemed to be considering the notion that he or she might be the next victim. Of course, everyone must have been a little cautious, a bit unsettled by the riot police units scattered here and there. What a mess, people appeared to think at least. Maybe they would go home earlier than usual.

But deep in their hearts, everyone believed they'd be going home.

That's how it was with these things. Very few people accepted as a hard reality the possibility that they might be the next to die. True, the probability of becoming the next victim was negligibly low.

Those victims must've been really unlucky…

A terrible thought, but what else could people think?

Anyway.

It was time for me to go ahead and join the unguarded crowd.

I got up from my seat only to feel my phone vibrating in my right pocket. I didn't recognize the number on the display, but I couldn't just ignore the call, so I went ahead and answered it.

"Ciao! Mikoko here!"

Hyper from the get-go. It was easy to imagine her giving me the thumbs-up on the other end. Well, I guess she probably wasn't actually doing that.

But without even making sure that she was talking to me, she was acting so bubbly and friendly. What if she had the wrong number?

A small fire ignited in my inquiring mind.

“Huhhh? Hey, it’s Mikoko. What’s wrong?”

I didn’t reply.

“Uhh… This is Ikkun, right?”

Again, I was silent.

“Hello-o-o? You’re Ikkun, aren’t you?”

I persisted in not replying.

“Did I mess up? Huh? I messed up!”

I kept up the silent treatment.

“Gahhh! It’s like getting all prepped for the next radio calisthenics session only to have them go, ‘We’re outta time, so just do the chicken dance’! I’m sorry, I dialed the wrong number!”

At that, I finally said: “No, you have the right number. What’s up?”

“Ack!” she shrieked in surprise. “Huh? Wha?” she sputtered. Eventually, she let out a sigh, so she must have been relieved.

I also figured that it was only a matter of seconds before her relief turned to anger.

“For crying out loud! It’s the phone! You have to say something! I’ll freak out if you don’t! Ikkun, you jerk! You snake! You…serial killer!”

I didn’t think I’d done anything that bad.

“Sorry, sorry, I was just kidding around.” I hadn’t meant to stay quiet for so long, but her unexpectedly hilarious reaction had thrown off my timing.

“God… It’s fine, I guess. Since it’s you and all.” Mikoko let out a moan. It was hard not to feel a little sorry for her. “Erm,” she said, as if to regain her composure, “this is a business call! Regarding

tomorrow's business!"

"You know, you don't have to yell. It's quiet here."

"Hm? Where are you now?"

"Ah, uh, at home. At the boarding house."

"Oh. I'm still at school. I had to talk to Inokawa-sensei about something, so I just got out of the research room. Isn't that place incredible?! Books everywhere!"

Inokawa-sensei led our orientation class. A slightly eccentric assistant professor, he was popular with his students apart from being way too strict about punctuality (if you weren't in your seat by the time the bell started ringing—even if you were in the classroom and were in the act of sitting down while it was ringing—he marked you absent).

"Umm, right, so about tomorrow! Will you be home tomorrow?!" asked Mikoko.

"Yeah. Sure. Are we meeting somewhere?"

"Uh-uh. If we set a meeting place, we might miss each other. That's no good, so I'll come meet you at your boarding house. I bought a scooter and I kinda wanna take it for a spin. So, let's say four o'clock. Can I go to your place at four?"

"Yeah, it's fine, but… Do you know where it is?"

"Huh? Oh, no problem, there." She sounded flustered for some reason. "I mean, because we made that address list, when classes first started. I have it."

"Is just the address enough?"

"I know Kyoto well, so we're a-okay. You're at Senbon Nakadachiuri, right?"

"Hmm…" There was something suspicious about the way she was acting, but if she said she was okay, I figured she was. "Fine by

me," I replied.

"Okay. That settles that, then. Umm, I'd like to talk more since I went to the trouble of calling, but I've got to go to driving school. I made an appointment, and if I don't go now I'll be late."

"Huh. You're taking driving lessons."

"Yep. How about you? Got a license?"

"I do. Just for automatic, though."

If you don't mind my being unlicensed, I could actually drive anything, but that's a secret.

"I see," Mikoko said. "I'm going for a manual. I'm at that age where I want my own set of wheels, you know? My dad said he'll get me a car once I get my license. Yup. Anyway, see ya tomorrow. Bye-e-e!"

She giggled and hung up. I stared at my phone for a while before putting it back in my pants pocket.

Right. We did have plans tomorrow, didn't we? It hadn't completely slipped my mind, but it was too close for comfort. At this rate, I might forget again by tomorrow. Maybe it'd be best if I wrote "Plans with Mikoko tomorrow" on the palm of my hand like some dim-witted grade schooler.

Oh, but if she was coming to meet me at my place, it didn't really matter if I remembered. I returned my pen case to my bag.

This time I did walk out of the McDonald's. It was already almost eight o'clock, and the shops outside were preparing to close. Suddenly something occurred to me.

"Ah, that's right. It's a birthday thing…"

In which case, should I take the opportunity to buy a present while I was out and about? It was only common sense□not that I ever thought of myself as someone with a lot of common sense. In fact, I'd been sort of half-forced into it. Maybe I didn't have to go out of my way to be a good person. As I thought it over, I peeped into a

nearby souvenir shop.

Tomoe Emoto.

Now, what kind of a character was she? I didn't have a single memory of her. Once I actually saw her face, I might. But no matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't remember a thing about her. Which meant she probably wasn't a particularly eccentric or remarkable person. Maybe she was a little more subdued than most. The kind of person who reads a book before the start of class instead of messing with her cell phone. Wait—hadn't Mikoko said she was a striking girl who always wore shiny clothes? Huh. I had no idea after all. Not even a vague image.

As for the other two… Muimi Atemiya and Akiharu Usami, was it? I tried to recall them as well, but with no success.

"Eh, I guess if they're Mikoko's friends, they can't be all that weird."

Tell me what company thou keepst, and I'll tell thee what thou art. The line came from Cervantes, and surely the converse also held true. Nothing to worry about too much.

As my mind wandered, I picked up a box of snacks from a display. They were yatsuhashi, cinnamon cookies folded into triangles and stuffed with red bean paste. Orthodox as traditional snacks went. Thirty pieces, 1,200 yen.

"Hm…"

Kyoto and yatsuhashi were synonymous with each other. If there were no yatsuhashi, it wasn't Kyoto, which meant that if there were yatsuhashi, it was. Compared to yatsuhashi, Kiyomizu Temple, the Daimonji Fire Festival, and the Big Three festivals didn't even matter. Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples were irrelevant. If you didn't eat yatsuhashi—written as "eight bridges"—you were eighty-percent ignorant of Kyoto.

"Okay, then."

And so it was settled that Tomoe would receive treats for her birthday. I didn't want to burden her with something non-

disposable, and I figured it would be the perfect snack for drinking. Oh, uh, did sweet stuff not go with alcohol? I didn't drink, so I didn't know. At any rate, it wasn't like they would be inedible.

And.

Right then.

My back

shook, and

I shivered.

It felt as though liquid nitrogen had been poured into my spinal cord. As if my entire body had been frozen to absolute zero, and the heat of the outside air might scorch me. Only my brain stem was functioning. The pressure of being caught between absolute opposites nearly crushed me. If I hadn't maintained my sanity, I'd have gotten pulverized in an instant, no doubt.

"…"

But I didn't turn around.

As naturally as possible, I thrust the box of yatsuhashi at the store clerk, who wore a ponytail dyed brown, an earring, and a smile that didn't seem to be for show.

"Thank you kindly!"

The clerk wrapped up the treats for me, and I accepted them as I fished for the exact change.

"Please come again, now," the clerk said cheerfully with a little head bob.

Surely it was this kind of heartfelt service that captured the hearts of tourists, I thought a little lazily as I left the store and began on my way towards Shijo Street.

And then I felt it. A gaze so intense it couldn't be ignored once

detected, and so ferocious there was no way not to be aware of it. No, this was more than a gaze.

This was murderous intent.

Free of all needless additives, of even malice, animosity, or aggression, a hundred-percent pure, this was murderous intent, absolute and ready to combust. A terrible, viscous presence seemed to coat my entire body. It went beyond unpleasant or unsettling.

I walked.

The presence followed me.

I walked some more.

The presence followed me.

“In other words, I’m being followed,” I muttered to myself.

Since when? From where?

I had no idea.

It was so blatant that I didn’t need to look back, or even perceive it.

That meant that whoever it was had noticed that I had noticed. Continuing to tail me anyway was what was so blatant about this.

“This ain’t good,” I sighed, weaving my way through the crowd. It was strange. I really thought I’d left all danger behind me…back on the other side of the ocean. Being tracked in this country, in this city, no less, was unthinkable, much less being killed. I had already employed Kunagisa’s skills to confirm that.

In which case…

This was a random act.

The first thing that came to mind was the feature story from the magazine in my bag.

A slasher.

“Aw, hell no…”

What had I done to deserve this?

To put it like Mikoko, It’s like forming a second Onyanko Club, but everyone’s a backup dancer. On second thought, I have no idea what that means. I guess you shouldn’t try to be something you’re not. Clearly I was panicking.

However…

Even supposing the person six hundred feet behind me was the infamous prowler□or just your run-of-the-mill psycho killer, or possibly someone with a grudge against me…

It was unnatural.

It was irrational.

It was unfathomable and illogical and unreal.

What I felt was uneasiness. Yes, the absolutely wrong, exemplarily mistaken answer, like noticing that you’re being “observed” by yourself from inside a mirror. I was confirming that the red line that’s usually in front was, suddenly, behind.

“More nonsense…”

Of course it was an illusion.

What mattered right now was that someone was following me.

This much was certain.

That, and I was going to be murdered.

This much was also certain.

With two essentially definite facts like those, I had no leeway to be distracted by any other sensations. Ultimately, my options were limited.

Give, or take.

“Well, well… This is getting uninteresting…”

I made my way from Shinkyogoku Street onto Shijo Street. On the other side of a cluster of cabs was a long line of cars. Shijo Street is extremely congested at that time of day, to the point that it’s actually faster to walk than to drive. In a town like Kyoto, which has so many intersections and traffic lights it isn’t even funny, a bicycle is by far the most effective way to get around. Number two, incidentally, is by foot. Maybe number three is a boogie board.

I had come to school by bus, so number two was my only option. I debated for only an instant about which way to go before heading east.

After a pause at a red light, I crossed Kawara-machi Street. If I kept going straight, I would arrive at Yasaka Shrine. From there, if I broke south, I would reach Kiyomizu Temple. It was a textbook route for the Kyoto sightseer. But I was no sightseer, and I had no intention of going as far as Yasaka Shrine.

The prickly presence didn’t recede.

I felt the high-pressure gaze edging ever closer. At this point, it amounted to plain violence.

“Oh boy… Yikes.”

May already and here I was in a cold sweat. Just how long had it been since I felt tense? I had to reel my memory back to that odd little island for sure. Yet, compared to that time, I was also subject to a different sensation.

I was tense, therefore at peace.

I was aware that in my state of tension, failure was wholly improbable.

“Phew…”

And so I arrived at Kamogawa, the river. Instead of crossing the Shijo Bridge, I made my way down the staircase beside it and emerged on the bank. While the sun is up, countless young couples

occupy the river's edge. In my opinion, the sight of them perfectly spaced out and chilling parallel to the flow is one of Kyoto's three must-see attractions. When the moon rises high, the bank offers itself as an after-bender hangout for drunks. After imbibing the night away, they go there to sober up. They range from college students to salarymen.

The lovers and the drunks have something in common: they're nuisances who go around shoving their happiness in other people's faces. But this was no time to be waxing philosophical. Whatever my view of lovers and drunks, only one thing mattered right now. This was the brief interval of the day when the riverbank was altogether empty. The lovers had already gone home, and the drunks were still getting drunk. In other words…

The perfect situation.

Especially if you happened to be under the bridge.

I entered into its shadow as soon as I descended to the riverbank. The noise of cars passing overhead. The chatter of people crossing the bridge□it was one hell of a ruckus.

But it wasn't enough.

It didn't muffle the guy's footsteps.

Szkk.

The sound of scraping grit.

"□ . …"

I muttered something and turned around.

" "

He declared something and confronted me.

The feeling was probably mere confusion.

Ordinary, everyday confusion and nothing more.

There was a mirror in front of me.

Or so I thought.

His height was a bit under five feet. He was long-limbed and slender as a flower stem. He wore tiger-striped shorts; nonskid rustic boots; a red, long-sleeved, hooded parka; and a black tactical vest. Both hands were clad with gloves, but they obviously weren't for something as cowardly as covering his fingerprints, as they were fingerless gloves. It was my guess that they served a more primitive and obvious purpose□to stop a knife from slipping on sweat.

His long hair was tied up in the back and buzzed on the sides as if he were a dancer. His right ear had a triple piercing, and two straps that looked like they belonged on a cell phone dangled from his left ear. His stylish sunglasses rendered his expression unreadable, but the sinister, clearly real tattoo marking just his right cheek communicated his bizareness.

He was unlike me in almost every conceivable way.

Our similarities ended with age and gender.

And yet I felt like I was looking into a mirror.

That's why I was confused.

And my counterparty appeared just as confused.

He made the first move.

He inserted his right hand into a pocket on his vest, and an instant later he was brandishing a small knife with a two-inch blade. He made not a single wasted motion, brushing the zenith of our

creatural limits.

Sound and light warped and bent around him.

If I were studying the scene as a bystander, I might have described it as art, even knowing that it was murder. His homicidal action was that perfect.

There was no dodging it.

Certainly no parrying it.

I managed, nonetheless, to evade the knife by swaying back my upper body. Of course, normally this would be impossible. I wouldn't say I'm any less athletic than average, but I'm definitely not a standout. I have neither the quick eye nor agile body needed to elude a plausible contender for the title of the world's fastest knife fighter.

Yet.

If a dump truck came straight at you at a hundred miles an hour, but you became aware of this when it was a few miles away, I think we can all agree that evading it would be a simple task.

Likewise, my assailant's slash attack was as evident an event as if I'd been anticipating it for the past five years.

I groped wildly for my bag, then swung it around, hoping to smash him in the face. But with no more than a simple motion of the neck, he managed to dodge my blow as if he had been expecting it for ten years. Because I had strained to escape his attack, I tumbled backward at this point. Of course, I didn't do anything as foolish as try to guard my body. Even a single arm wasted on such a maneuver would surely create a prime opportunity. Just as I feared, he wheeled back from his initial miss and came straight for my carotid artery. Not good. There was no evasive maneuver I could attempt in my position. Well, theoretically, I could perform a clumsy roll and dodge this one attack, but the next moment, or the moment after that, within one second, within three moments, regardless of how pathetically I scrambled around, he would plunge

his knife deep into my spine. As though cursed with some of that damn precognition, I could imagine it clearly.

Dodging would be beside the point. Which meant simply taking it. I swung my right elbow up at the knife.

But.

My opponent twisted his wrist and altered the direction of his swing as easily as if it had lacked any. The momentum from my elbow strike inevitably had me swinging at nothing. This left my entire front side, including all of my organs, not least notable of which were the heart and lungs, completely exposed.

Behind the sunglasses, his eyes seemed to smile ever so faintly.

With another twist, he aimed the knife directly at my heart.

A moment's pause.

Then the tactical knife swung down at double speed. Too fast for the eye to behold□a will to murder that transcended the human perceptive apparatus.

There wasn't even time to gasp. Right, actually there shouldn't have been any.

Yet this situation, too, I knew about from before I was born□

"□□!"

"□□!"

The knife tore through a single layer of my clothing and halted. So my left index and middle fingers also stopped□having pushed up my assailant's sunglasses.

A stalemate.

He had my heart and I had his eyes. If you put the two on a scale, their weights obviously differed, but this was no matter to be weighed on a scale. For my opponent, tearing through my flesh and

bone to demolish my heart was simpler than taking candy from a baby. But it would leave just enough time for me to pulverize his eyeballs.

The opposite was also true.

I could sacrifice my heart to crush his eyeballs.

He could offer up his eyes to obliterate my heart.

Hence a stalemate.

We stayed that way for as long as five hours, or maybe five seconds, and then□

“What a riot,” he said, tossing his knife aside.

“Nonsense,” I corrected, retracting my fingers.

He backed away from me, and I rose to my feet, shaking pebbles off my clothes and slowly straightening out my posture.

Our fight had been a farce, a scripted affair. It couldn’t have turned out any other way, and all I felt was fatigue, like I’d gone and finished some summer-vacation assignment.

“I’m Zerozaki,” my opponent said, straightening his crooked glasses. “Hitoshiki Zerozaki. So who the hell are you, Mr. Doppelgänger?”

It was.

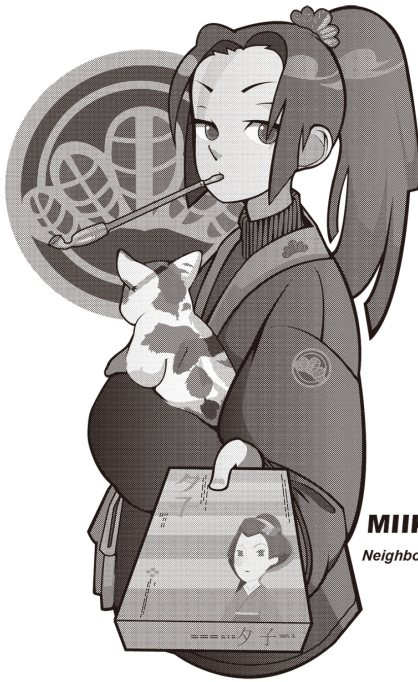
As if.

He was asking someone his own name.

The query seemed off.

There□the first contact between a passive bystander and a serial killer.

And wouldn’t you know, it was Friday the thirteenth.



MIIKO ASANO
Neighbor

Chapter 2
BANQUET ON A NIGHT OUT
—(Yuya's Ties)

0

Misfortune and misery are underplayed.

Give me more despair. Give me more darkness.

Give me wholehearted depravity.

1

Apparently, the thirteenth of any given month is more likely to fall on a Friday than any other day. Friday the thirteenth occurs once a year at least, and three or four times a year on average, and so on. But for a guy like me who isn't Christian—I don't even understand the difference between Catholic and Protestant—it means little more than that the next day is Saturday the fourteenth.

Now then.

The next day, Saturday, May fourteenth. I awoke inside my one-room apartment in Senbon Nakadachiuri and looked at my clock. It was about ten to four—in the afternoon.

"Seriously?"

I was a bit…that is, fairly—no, insanely—surprised. This was a whole new oversleeping record for me. How many years had it been since I last slept into the afternoon? And it wasn't only the afternoon—the p.m. was a third over already. This would probably remain as a

stain on my memory for the rest of eternity.

“But then again, I went to bed at nine in the morning, so it’s only natural.”

Finally shaking away my drowsiness, I returned to my senses and rose from bed.

The room was four tatami mats in size and had a naked lightbulb. It was a wonderfully classic space so full of anachronisms that you wondered if it had been around since the olden days when Kyoto was still Japan’s capital. Naturally, the rent was deathly low. Deathly to the landlord, that is.

I folded up my futon and stuck it in the closet. There was no toilet or bath, but there was a sink of sorts, so I used it to wash my face, then got dressed. My wardrobe wasn’t exactly jam-packed with options, so all of this took less than five minutes.

I opened the window and let in the outside air. Kyoto is an incredible place, in that once you’ve passed Golden Week, you’ve already entered summer. It’s as if life is still being run according to the old Chinese calendar□or as if fall and spring don’t even exist.

Then came a knock at my door. The apartment wasn’t equipped with such modern amenities as intercoms.

It was exactly four o’clock. Mikoko was certainly a punctual one. I was a bit dazzled by this. People who were as anal about time as Inokawa-sensei were just annoying, but if you wanted to refer to yourself as a human being, you had to be at least as on time as an analog clock. In that sense, Mikoko passed as a human.

“Yo, I’m coming.”

I unbolted the lock (now that’s what I call radically retro) and opened the door. But to my surprise, it wasn’t Mikoko.

“Sorry.”

It was Miiko Asano, my neighbor. She was twenty-two years old, making her my senior, and worked various gigs. There was

something Japanesey about her style, and now too she was wearing traditional summer casual wear. It was black cloth, with the Buddhist term Carnage printed on the back of her top in white.

She had a distinctly samurai-esque ponytail. At first she seemed unapproachable, but after talking to her, it quickly became clear that she was a pretty decent human being. Maybe a little on the mysterious side, but that just added to her charm.

“Miiko… It’s you. Good morning.”

“Yeah. Were you sleeping?”

“Yes, I actually overslept a bit…”

“At this hour, I don’t think it still qualifies as a bit,” she said drably. With her subdued demeanor, it was often hard to guess what she was thinking. It wasn’t that she was completely expressionless. Instead, her default expression was a glare, with changes so subtle that she might as well have been expressionless.

“Oh, please come in. As usual, there’s not much to see, though,” I said without a hint of false modesty. I stepped aside to make way, but she shook her head.

“Nah, I just came to give you this.” She passed me a flat box. It was wrapped in paper with the word Snacks written in big letters.

“…”

“They’re yatsuhashi. A Kyoto favorite.”

“I know, but□”

“They’re yours. They’re good. Well, see ya… I’ve got to get to work.”

She spun around, flashing that Carnage at me.

The fact that she offered no explanation as to why she’d given me a box of yatsuhashi was hardly unexpected. She was a woman of few words, and when you thought about how much effort you’d have to

exert just to fish an answer out of her, it was easy to justify leaving things unexplained. And so I sent her off with a simple “Thanks very much, I’ll definitely enjoy them,” and nothing more.

She stopped in her tracks. “Sounded like you got back in the morning,” she said without turning around. “So what’s the story?”

“…”

Damn these thin-walled apartments. Actually I suppose they do have their perks. “Oh, I was just hanging out with a friend all night. Nothing shady. Nothing exciting either.”

“A friend… Wouldn’t happen to be that colorful blue-haired girl who came by around February, would it?”

“Actually, Kunagisa’s an extreme shut-in. This was someone else. A guy.”

She nodded with a look of complete and utter disinterest, but I wondered if she would’ve perked up a little if I said, “I was schmoozing with that killer everyone’s been talking about, under the Shijo Bridge.” Then again, Miiko being the way she was, it was entirely possible that she wouldn’t have given me more than a “huh” even if she knew I wasn’t joking.

She nodded, seemingly satisfied, and proceeded on her way down the planked hallway. She was headed to her part-time job. When I first discovered those weren’t just her indoor clothes, even I couldn’t help but vocalize my astonishment.

Shutting the door, I retreated back into my room.

Hmm, but why did it have to be yatsuhashi? In fact, they were the exact kind I had picked up the previous day for Tomoe’s birthday. It was a terrifying coincidence, but there it was.

“Well, whatever.”

I stacked the two boxes in the corner.

Looking at the clock, I discovered it was several minutes past four.

Thirty minutes later, it was past half past four.

“Well, duh,” I said aloud and lay down on the floor.

Now. Wasn’t Mikoko coming to pick me up at four? Of this I was certain. I may forget things, but I never misremember them. This meant Mikoko had either gotten in an accident, gotten lost, or was just a sloppy person. But no matter which it was, there was nothing I could do.

“Time for some Eight Queens?”

Of course, there was nothing as extravagant as a chessboard in my room, so I’d just have to play it in my mind. The rules to Eight Queens were simple and concise—just place eight queens on a chessboard so that none of them can capture any other. It’s one of those “brain exercise” routines. I’d played the game quite a few times, so I basically knew the solution. But with my poor memory, I always forgot the exact arrangement, so I was able to enjoy the game every time I played it. Okay, not that it was really all that enjoyable. But it was a good way to kill some time.

I start strong, but the trouble sets in around the fourth queen. Making ends meet becomes a challenge. Queens just don’t get along with other queens. There should never be more than one party in power. Moreover, when I allowed my thoughts to wander like that, I lost track of where I had put all the pieces and had to start over. Having to section off my mind was indescribably thrilling. It wasn’t unlike walking on a balance beam, only the more pieces you placed—that is, the closer you got to the solution—the harder it became. In that sense, it was very much a game, and a good one. When you failed, there was no one but yourself on whom to vent your anger, and its greatest pleasure lay in that paradox.

Just as I was trying to place the seventh queen, there was a knock at my door.

“Ikkun!”

The chessboard went flying.

Queens everywhere.

For an instant, my heart, not to mention my mind, stopped.

“……”

I approached the door and swung it open. This time, it really was Mikoko. She wore a pink camisole with a red miniskirt, exposing a considerable amount of skin and looking healthy and refreshing for it. “Morning!” she said with a wave. Then came the full-faced grin. “Ikkun, guten morgen!”

“…”

“… …”

“……”

“Morgen…gen…gen…like the Doppler effect or something.” As unflappable as she was, her smile was growing strained. Her eyes drifted away from me, and she asked with a tilt of her head, “Umm, I was just wondering, I know you’re usually not the type, but… Are you mad or resentful or hate-filled or cursing my name? Actually, cursing my name does seem like something you’d do.”

“…”

“Come on, let’s communicate! Hey! Don’t be so quiet! When you get all quiet I feel like I’m about to have something terrible done to me!”

“Your palm.”

“Hm?”

“Hold the palm of your hand in front of your face, like this.”

“Okay…”

She did as told.

Smack, I smooshed her hand into her own face.

“Gwah!” she shrieked in unfeminine fashion. Satisfied for the time being, I went back inside to fetch my bag. Now where had I put those yatsuhashi?

“Waah! You’re terrible!” she accused, coming into my room for some reason. “You’re being violent with me just for being a little late? That’s abuse, you know. It’s like forming a jury-based judicial system, only all the jurors are bratty kids!”

Apparently forty minutes late was only “a little late” in Mikoko’s mind. Without waiting for an invitation, she came into the middle of my room and took a seat on the floor. Plop. She scanned her surroundings with a look of true curiosity.

“Oooooo,” she sighed in awe. “Wow, there’s nothing here. Amazing!”

“You know, that kind of compliment isn’t particularly flattering.”

“You really don’t have a TV! You’re like one of those struggling students from the good ol’ days. I bet you study by the light of fireflies! Who else lives in this building?”

“Uh, well, there’s one swordswoman with part-time jobs, one hermit, a fifteen-year-old and thirteen-year-old brother and sister currently running away from home, and then there’s me, so that’s four rooms and five people. Up until recently there was an aspiring singer too, but she went to Tokyo to launch her major label debut.”

“Wow, so it’s kind of prosperous. Kind of a surprise. Oh, I guess that means there’s an open room here? Hmm. It does have a certain ambience, huh? Maybe I should move in!”

What could she have possibly seen in these apartments, in this room, that would’ve given her such an idea? “Better not,” I counseled. “Anyway, let’s get going.”

“Ah, not yet. It’s still too early,” Mikoko hurried to say.

“But won’t it be bad if we don’t leave soon? We’re already forty minutes behind.”

“No, we just have to be there by six. Tomo’s apartment isn’t far from here, so even if we leave at five thirty we’ll have plenty of time.”

“Oh really?”

“Really,” Mikoko said, pointing up her index finger. The theatrical gesture was pretty cute, but it didn’t seem worth mentioning, so I didn’t. I might end up encouraging her.

“Then why did you say four o’clock?”

“Huh? Oh, that. Well, you know. Um, I’m not great at being punctual. It was just in case, just in case.”

“You mean there was a chance you might have been an hour and a half late…” Just thinking about it made me feel like blood might shoot out of my ears.

“Huh?” Mikoko peeped at my face to catch my expression. “What’s the matter?” she asked cheerfully.

“…Nothing. I’m not thinking anything. I’m definitely not thinking about how you should maybe consider the feelings of the person who’s doing the waiting. Or how you should stick to times that you yourself set. Or how you should at least call if you’re going to be late. Or how you should take better care of chessboards.”

“Chessboards?”

She tilted her head.

Naturally she wasn’t supposed to understand that.

I found the yatsuhashi lying in the corner of the room and cut the seal on one of the boxes. I placed it in front of Mikoko.

“I can eat ’em?”

“Sure.”

I stood up and made my way over to the sink. I thought to boil

some water for tea, but I didn't have a kettle. I thought of using a pot, but I had no stove, either. So I just filled a cup with tap water and placed it in front of her.

"…"

Looking thoroughly baffled, she glanced at the liquid thrust before her, then pretended not to have seen it and left it alone.

She chowed down enthusastically on the yatsuhashi. "Hmm. Asking this might be one of those things and all, but are you poor, by any chance?"

"No, I'm not particularly strapped for funds."

Living in an apartment like this, I had no evidence to support this statement, but it was the truth. At the very least, I had enough money saved up to pay for four years of college without lifting a finger. It wasn't money I had earned, but it was in my possession.

"I guess you're sort of an economist then. Or is it a philosopher?"

"I'm just bad at spending money. Sort of the opposite of a shopaholic."

I helped myself to some yatsuhashi as I spoke. Mikoko gave me a halfhearted nod of comprehension.

As she knelt on the straw-matted floor, I stared at her from top to bottom. Hmm. Not for any reason in particular, but there was something very awkward about her sitting in the middle of my room. I don't know if you would call it unnatural or risqué, but something about it felt incredibly iffy.

I stood up.

"Huh? Where ya going? We've still got forty minutes."

"Forty minutes is just a little, isn't it?"

"Ahh! Ikkun, that's the kind of thing a big jerko would say!" Mikoko recoiled overzealously. "You don't have to hold it against

me forever!”

“I’m just joking. Let’s go get a light meal somewhere. It’s no fun just picking at each other in this empty room.”

I hoisted my bag over my shoulder and headed toward the door.

“Aww, that’s not true,” Mikoko mumbled as she followed me.

2

Tomoe resided in a students-only condo-quality complex near Nishioji Maruta-machi. Just looking at the steel-reinforced, concrete exterior, I could imagine the difference in rent from my place. Five times as much, or even ten if you got swindled.

Mikoko must have been there before, because she entered the main lobby with what you might call an air of confidence. She pushed the room number on the intercom and pressed the call button.

“Yellooo! It’s Mikoko-cakes.”

“Yo-yo. C’mon up.”

As the somewhat drowsy voice emerged from the intercom, the firmly locked glass door slid open. An autolock security system. Actually, maybe that’s too extravagant a term. Whether that lock was there or not made little difference to anyone trying to break in.

“Come on, hurry. Hurry hurry hurry hurry.” Mikoko passed through the door and beckoned for me to make haste. “Sixth floor, sixth floor! We gotta hurry!”

“It’s not like the sixth floor is going to get away…”

“Yeah, but it won’t come down to greet us, either!”

“That’s true…”

I followed along as told.

“The sixth floor is the very top one. Tomo lives in the corner unit, and it has a pretty nice view, as views go.”

“Mm, nice view?”

That was one thing I couldn't hope for where I was living. If you opened the window, you got trees.

We called down the elevator and got in.

"I wonder if Akiharu's here yet. Muimi is pretty much a given…"

Mikoko was incredibly excited. Seeing her carefree expression, even I couldn't help but think about how nice it must be to have friends. Whether or not it worked for me, it must've been very nice for her.

We got off on the sixth floor. Mikoko raced down the hallway and stopped in front of the very last door. "Over here, over here!" she shouted and beckoned. It made me want to ask if she was just completely oblivious to the looks people gave her.

She pushed the bell. Ding-dong. The door opened, and a girl revealed herself.

"Welcome," the girl□most likely Tomoe□greeted tiredly, a cigarette hanging from her lips. She was absolutely not what I expected. "Hi, Mikoko. On time for a change, eh?"

She wore her brown hair in a longish sauvage and a light jacket and jeans combo□a handsome fashion sense. She was probably a little taller than me and so sickly (i.e. thin) that if she said she had only one day to live, I'd believe her. Her slightly sardonic expression matched her physique.

"Howdy, Muimi!" greeted Mikoko. "Haro-haro!"

It seemed this wasn't Tomoe after all, but Muimi. Oh, she said, noticing my presence. Without a hint of shyness, she gave me a hard study from top to bottom. "Maybe this is our first time talking, Ikkun," she said with a smirk.

"Uh huh," I answered apathetically. "Hullo."

It seemed my precise degree of apathy struck a chord with her. She let out an exaggerated laugh. It was boisterous, and not very girlish. "Well, how 'bout that. You are an interesting guy. I think we'll get along."

“Really?” My uh huh, more a sigh than a response, was hardly anything that warranted her approval. “I don’t think so.”

“Heh, we’ll get to that later. Just come in. Stupid Akiharu isn’t here yet. We just called and he was still at home.”

“Wow, he’ll never change. Last time he claimed he got confused by the time-zone difference. That lousy tardyman.”

Mikoko sure was throwing stones from a proverbial glass house. It was almost impressive. Not in the mood to start teasing her about it, though, I just silently removed my shoes.

At the end of the short hallway between the kitchen and bathroom was a door. It seemed this was one of those sectioned-off studios. Muimi went ahead of us and opened the door. The room inside was about eight or nine mats in size, but the floor was hardwood. By the window was a bed, and in the middle of the room, a mini-table covered with a cake, snacks, and a row of empty glasses. So this was more of a drinks thing than a dinner thing after all.

A girl was sitting daintily on the floor by the table.

This time it had to be Tomoe. She was even more petite than Mikoko and dressed in a strawberry-patterned dress. Her hair was in pigtails. She gave me a little wave.

She was just as shy as I’d imagined. And yet something about her made me think she might be a handful. It was like there was more than meets the eye□as if a simple layout still prevented you from seeing through to the back, as if you were being asked for the sum of all integers.

“No…”

That was nonsense. Everyone feels that way upon meeting someone for the first time. Tomoe and I technically weren’t strangers, but I didn’t really know her, so it was only natural that I had such an impression.

Hmm. Now that I thought about it, we indeed might have crossed paths a few times in our orientation class. I joined her at the table

so that I was facing her and tossed out a simple greeting.

“Yo.”

Tomoe tilted her head before giving me a politely deep bow. “Thanks for going to all this trouble. Sorry to ask such a big favor.” Her voice was calm and pretty, with a moist quality. “I’ve always wanted to have a chat with you, so I hope you have a good time today.”

I was a little moved by her good manners. It was something I hadn’t seen much lately (especially in the last day or two).

“Ahahaha, quick to break the ice!” Mikoko said, sitting down next to me on her knees. Muimi, in turn, sat down next to her. This allowed enough room for Akiharu to eventually come sit between me and Tomoe.

“Ahhh.” Muimi put out her cigarette with her fingers and deposited it in an ashtray. “So what are we doing? We’ve got a brand-new guest here. Should we go ahead and start? It seems stupid to sit around wasting time just because of that asshead.”

“Hey, we can’t do that,” Mikoko objected. “For something like this we have to all be together. Right, Tomo?”

Tomoe nodded. “Yup, I agree with Mikoko. You know he’ll be here soon, so don’t be so impatient. Okay?”

“I don’t really care, but…” Muimi gestured towards me. “What about Ikkun here?”

“I don’t mind. I’m used to waiting.” I just fed her an easy line because it was too much of a hassle to argue, but it certainly didn’t mean I was used to people making me wait.

“Yeah?” Muimi tilted her head but simply said, “Well, whatever then.” Pulling out a fresh cigarette, she studied me and asked, “Are you an anti-tobacco kind of guy?”

“I don’t smoke myself, but you can smoke all you like.”

“Ah. No, I’m good.” Breaking in half the cigarette she hadn’t even lit yet, she tossed it in the ashtray. “I make it a point not to smoke around nonsmokers.”

“Huh.”

Did that mean Mikoko and Tomoe were both smokers? The fact that Muimi had asked only me seemed to indicate as much. Huh… I was a little surprised.

“Hey! Muimi, you’ll make me sound like a smoker if you put it like that!” Mikoko objected once again. She was giving us the puppy-dog eyes. For some reason she seemed vehemently opposed to me finding out she was a smoker.

“But you do smoke.”

“I don’t! I was just going with the flow that one time!”

“Ah, right. Gotcha. My fault, my fault.” Muimi gave her a friendly pat as Mikoko threw her little tantrum. Meanwhile, Tomoe watched on in delight.

Hm. It didn’t take long to notice the dynamic here. It was the good girl, the bad girl, and the regular girl. This made me wonder what Akiharu’s role was. He finally showed up at six thirty, half an hour late.

“Sorry, sorry. I thought I’d be here on time, but the train was crowded and stuff,” he casually excused himself.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Tomoe greeted him with a smile. The good girl.

“The train doesn’t arrive any later just because it’s crowded! And you live in a boarding house, so you don’t even take the train anyway!” Mikoko, the regular girl, had the nerve to question his lame excuse.

“You think you can get off with a simple apology? You gotta chug three beers,” Muimi said, passing a beer bottle over to him. The bad girl.

“Okay, okay. Don’t rush me so much, Atemiya. This is a birthday, a birthday. Not a mayday. Goddamn I’m a clever bastard. Oh…” It seemed he had noticed my presence. He gave a problem-child sneer. “Heh heh, so you really brought him, Aoii.” He sat down next to me and said, “Well, good to meet you,” with a slight bow.

I returned it.

He had an easy-breezy air about him, with light brown hair and a taste for street fashion. Maybe it wasn’t uncommon for a university student to dress like that, but at Rokumeikan, it was kind of unusual. Judging from his build, it looked like he was involved in some kind of sport, but I couldn’t tell which one.

“Umm, what? Hm. Are we all supposed to just call you Ikkun, too?”

“I don’t mind.”

“I see, I see. Gotcha. You’re a good guy. Don’t you think so, Aoii?”

He shot Mikoko a meaningful look. She shot back a flustered one. “Oh, uh, yeah.” Judging from her response, it didn’t seem like she thought I was a very good guy at all. Of course, considering how much I made fun of her, that was probably only natural.

“Well, shall we start?” asked Muimi. She seemed to be the leader of the four, or at least the coordinator. She pointed at me. “Umm, you don’t drink?”

I shook my head no.

“Oh? What’s this now, Ikkun? You can’t go around being finicky, you know. Alcohol is a vital component in man-to-man interaction. I mean, am I right or am I right?”

“Akiharu! What did I tell you about pushing your bullshit opinions on others?! I’ll fucking kill you!” Muimi gave him the look of death. Her cool, almost dazed demeanor from a moment ago had sharpened into a knife of fury. “Did you already forget what I told you last time? Huh?”

Akiharu quivered and tensed with fear. “Uh…”

“I’m not lookin’ for an uhhh. ”

“Sorry.”

“Not lookin’ for a ‘sorry’ either. Why the hell are you apologizing to me? Huh?”

Akiharu’s mouth opened and closed like he was a suffocating goldfish. Then he looked over at me. “Please forgive me,” he apologized.

“Okay, then,” Muimi said with a look of satisfaction. “Sorry there, Ikkun. He didn’t mean anything by it. Forgive the guy, will ya?” Completely her original self, she smiled at me. “Did he piss you off?”

“Uh, I don’t really care.”

Muimi Atemiya. She was definitely an ex-delinquent. No, not even ex. That brown sauvage did seem a little out of date.

I needed to call her Boss.

Meanwhile, Mikoko poured some beer for everyone, except me. A glass of oolong tea was placed in front of me instead.

“So who’s going to lead the proceedings? Shall it be Tomo, our queen for a day?”

“Yeah, I believe it shall,” Muimi said. “Tomoe, let’s have it.”

Tomoe raised her glass a bit reluctantly. “Okay then. To my twentieth birthday and our new friend.”

Cheers.

I lightly tipped my glass.

3

“Being friends is like, uh, you know, like…yeah,” Zerozaki said with a cynical smile. The tattoo scrawled across the right side of his face wrinkled unpleasantly. “What do you think?”

“You’re actually asking me? I thought this was going to be some kind of spiel,” I commented, a bit appalled.

“Hah, don’t expect me to do everything. They say if you want to figure out your own opinion, you gotta ask others theirs, right? So let’s hear it. What do you think? What is a friend?”

“It’s not such a hard question. It’s just someone you hang out with, have meals with, joke around about stupid things with. Someone who brings you peace. That kind of thing, yeah?”

“You got it. Exactamundo. If you look at it that way, friends are such a simple thing, man, like pie. You hang out, you eat together, act stupid, and feel peaceful together, and that makes you friends. If you come to each other’s rescue, you’re close friends. If you smooch each other sometimes, you’re lovers. Oh, what a treasure of life friendship is!” Zerozaki said with a sneer. “So the question is, how long do these friendships last? A year? Five years? Ten years? Forever? Until tomorrow?”

“Is your point that even friendships come to an end?”

“My point is that all things come to an end.”

“Well, sure. But without endings, there could be no beginnings□a simple condition of possibility. If you’re looking to gain something, you’ve got to be prepared to sacrifice one-third of it. If you want a payoff, you’ve got to take a risk. If you can’t do that, you’re better off just living with what you’ve got.”

“Gahaha. You must be the last type.”

I had no need for things I would just lose in time.

If it was just going to end anyway, it didn't have to begin.

I had no need for pleasure if it would be accompanied by pain.

"Why, are you any different?" I asked.

If it meant never being sad, I didn't have to be happy.

If it meant never failing, I didn't have to succeed.

Evolution, loaded with risk, was a waste of time.

"Well, actually, with these things, it's true whether you like it or not," I said.

"No doubt."

Zerozaki laughed.

I didn't.

Be that as it may.

We were three hours into the party.

I won't get into what happened during those three hours. Nobody particularly wants others to see what they're like when they're drunk, and they certainly don't want to have the details relayed from person to person. No matter how people feel while they're drinking, inevitably good old shame comes to pay them a visit afterwards. Between who you are under the influence of alcohol and who you are when you're sober, it's difficult to determine which is real, but one thing's for sure. A wild night spent in good fun isn't something you want to try to recount later on. It's one of those "unpaintable scenes" like Taro Urashima referred to.

Still, if I were to dare to share a little vignette of the evening's festivities just for kicks:

“So whaddaya call a rock made of oxygen and nitrogen?”

“Quartz! Gaaahahahaha!”

“Like a two-hundred-shot barrage from a water-cooled heavy machine gun, only it’s an assassin squad!”

“Shit, that aside, it’s hot today. Why is it so hot in the middle of May? Is it global warming? Is it the greenhouse effect?”

“What?! Listen here, chump, if you want to complain about the summer heat, you answer to me! Bring it!”

“Are you the one they caught in Catcher in the Rye?!”

“It’s a tropical night, that’s what it is.”

“Then that makes me a tropical fish!”

Three hours later.

At the moment, Mikoko, Akiharu, and Tomoe were playing PS2. It looked like a racing game. Realistically depicted four-wheeled machines busily sped around an on-screen circuit.

Hmm. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it picturesque, but there was something rather unique about watching them all so fully immersed in their fun. I sensed that I was partaking in the festivities, but I also felt forlorn.

“Well, I guess even this is…”

Someone slapped me on the shoulder. It was Muimi, who had to be pretty good at holding her liquor. She seemed as good as sober despite the heavy imbibing even I had noticed.

She didn’t call herself Boss for nothing. Not that she called herself Boss at all.

“Wanna go outside for a bit?” she invited, pointing toward the entrance. “Let’s go to the convenience store.”

“What about Mikoko and the others?”

“Let ’em be. They won’t care anyway.”

She was right about that. I nodded and left the room with her. We got into the elevator, traveled down to the first floor, and exited the building.

“Is the convenience store close by?”

“Ah, it’s a bit of a walk. But c’mon, let’s walk a bit. It’ll help me sober up.”

“You don’t really seem drunk though.”

“Maybe not on the surface, but I’m pretty far gone. It feels like my brain’s flipped upside down so my cerebrum and cerebellum are switched. Right now I wanna kick the crap outta that sign.”

“Just don’t kick the crap out of me.”

“I’ll try,” she promised with a little laugh. She shook her head and looked up toward the sky.

“Doesn’t really feel like a birthday party,” I said. “Is Tomoe happy? She’s drunk now, but maybe she’ll get depressed about it later.”

“I wonder… But it’s better than being depressed from the beginning. Yeah. It’s all good… You don’t need a good reason to get wild. Ahh… I’m groggy.”

“You look pretty exhausted, Muimi.”

“Well, that’s what I get for hanging out with those guys.”

My sentiments exactly. Mikoko was spunky enough to begin with, but when she was inebriated she was four times as bad. Then there was Akiharu, and even Tomoe was getting pretty rowdy.

“I guess not getting drunk as easily puts you at a disadvantage,” I remarked. “It must be hard to follow along with the mood.”

“Exactly. I mean, it’s still fun, so no big deal.”

“You think it’s okay to leave those three drunks in a room unattended?”

“They’re not kids. They’ll be fine. Actually, it’s probably more dangerous to be walking around outside in the middle of the night.”

Muimi had a point.

We were in the midst of the Kyoto Serial Prowler Case.

So that was why she’d bothered taking me along with her. I may look scrawny and unreliable, but I’m still a guy, in a manner of speaking.

“What a messed-up world, huh? What could be enjoyable about taking apart a human being?”

“Different strokes, I guess,” I tried to brush off the topic. Thrust into a conversation about it, there was a chance I’d let my tongue slip. It wasn’t that Zerozaki had told me to keep my mouth shut, but it sure wasn’t the kind of thing I wanted everyone and their mother to know about.

“I can’t understand it at all,” Muimi said. “I mean, I’ve been around for twenty years. Even I’ve thought to myself, I oughta kill that bastard. Actually, it happens a lot. Even now. Like, This person would be better off dead. Killing him would serve the greater good.”

“…”

“But what’s up with killing indiscriminately? Finding pleasure in murder itself. I don’t get it…”

“In general, they say indiscriminate serial killers are fueled by hatred. So it’s just like when you say to yourself, ‘I oughta kill that bastard.’”

“Really? But then the killings wouldn’t be indiscriminate.”

“Wrong. For him, just passing by you can give birth to hatred. In other words, what he hates is the world as a whole. The world, as vague and nebulous as the air, never ceases to envelope him, and he hates it. That’s why it seems indiscriminate.”

“Hmm…”

Muimi nodded, but to be honest, I was only speculating. I had no idea why he’d committed himself to murder. We’d only talked about stupid, irrelevant things the previous night and never touched on his motive.

We were probably saving the best for last, childish as that may sound.

“It’s nonsense, though,” I said.

Muimi scratched her head quizzically.

While we were talking, we reached the convenience store. She entered ahead of me and quickly made her way to the drinks section.

“You’re buying more alcohol?”

“Nah, there’s already plenty of that. Let’s get some Pocari. Gotta sober those guys up or they won’t be able to get home.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

We put three two-liter bottles of the sports drink in a basket, picked out a few types of snacks, and proceeded to settle up at the register. Maybe I should’ve expected it, but I ended up carrying everything.

As we left the store, Muimi pulled a cigarette from her pocket, stuck it in her mouth, and lit it with a cool-looking Zippo, all in one fluid motion.

“Ah!” she said and immediately tried to extinguish it with her fingers.

“I don’t care if you smoke one. We’re outside, anyway.”

“Really?”

“I guess you aren’t supposed to smoke and walk at the same time, but since it’s night and nobody’s around, it’s probably fine as long as you don’t litter ashes everywhere.”

“Well… Nah, it’s okay. I’ll stick to my resolution.” She went ahead and snuffed it with her fingers, curled up the butt, and put it in her pocket. It seemed she wasn’t the littering type. I was a little impressed; for a college student, she had above-average morals.

“If you don’t mind my asking, isn’t that hot?”

“Not really. I’m used to it,” Muimi replied with a slightly bashful smile. “There was this Mafia boss bad guy in a movie I used to like, and he did it with cigars. With the palm of his hand. It seemed cool, so I started imitating him.”

“Huh.”

“Looking back, it’s just that the actor was cool, but it’s a habit now. Anyway, that aside… Ikkun, let’s talk seriously for a minute.” As abruptly as she’d flicked a circuit switch, her expression turned solemn. I couldn’t help but be a little surprised. “It’s pretty tough keeping up with Mikoko’s hyperness, huh?” she said.

“Not particularly.”

“Okay.” Muimi nodded along. Then, her expression grew downright dire. After hesitating for a moment, she asked me, “What do you think of Mikoko?”

“What do I think?”

Judging from Muimi’s demeanor, she wasn’t looking for some halfhearted bullshit answer. But I couldn’t figure out what her question was supposed to mean. Really, she wanted to know what I thought?

“Well, I think she’s got a little bit of red in her hair. She’s around five feet tall and may or may not weigh as much as one hundred ten. From the way she acts, I’d guess she’s a type B, and her

astrological sign is probably one of the beasts. She's got a kind of koala-ish feel in general."

"I wasn't looking for some halfhearted bullshit answer."

Oops. Delinquent mode… Why oh why do I so love stepping on land mines, I wondered, breaking eye contact with her. "I dunno, I mean, she's nice enough, isn't she? Sure she's a little hyper, which can be exhausting, but I know a girl who's even worse, so it doesn't particularly bother me."

"Huh. How neutral of you."

"Well, I don't like making waves."

"I see…" Muimi paused for a moment before giving me a sort of sidelong glance. "You're kind of a slimeball, Ikkun."

"I'm aware of it."

"Aware… I'm not sure. I can't really tell. Anyway, let me give you a word of advice."

She took a step ahead and turned to face me directly. I had no choice but to stop. The condo was still about a hundred feet away. Surely the others were still inside racing. Muimi ran her fingers through her sauvage hair and shot me a glare.

"Mikoko and I have been friends since we were just little brats."

"Huh."

"So if you hurt her, I'll never forgive you."

"…"

I scratched my head. Why was she telling me this? Was she mad about the few times I'd teased Mikoko? It didn't seem like anything to take so seriously, but Muimi sure didn't seem to be joking, so I answered with a shrug.

"It's okay. Despite how it seems, I'm actually nice to my friends."

Muimi blinked her narrow eyes at me and laughed. “Hahahahaha!”

After laughing for some time, she spun back around.

“I stand corrected…” She recommenced walking. “You’re just clueless.”

It felt like a terrible insult, but at the same time, it was probably the most accurate description anyone had ever applied to me in all my nineteen years, so it was hard to get angry.

We returned to the room to find that the others were indeed still racing. Surprisingly, Tomoe seemed to be the best at it. Mikoko was a lap behind.

“Yo! Guzzle down this Pocari, you goons! You drunken bitches!”

For some reason, Muimi suddenly went berserk and smacked the “drunken bitches” in their heads with the bottle. Being hit in the head with a full plastic bottle should have been fairly painful, but Mikoko and the others were so thoroughly numb they didn’t even seem to mind.

I don’t like noisiness.

I hate boisterousness.

Loudness irritates me.

But on occasion.

Like maybe once a year.

It wasn’t so bad.

Or so I thought.

I wrongly thought so.

4

It was past eleven p.m.

“Well, thanks for tonight,” Muimi said, rising to her feet. “Akiharu, take me home.”

“Aw, why?” the guy whined, sprawled out in the corner. “Just go yourself. I’m gonna rest a little first. Your place is far. Mine is in the opposite direction.”

“Are you a man? Don’t tell me you’re not even worth a ride home.”

“Tch… Fine.” He stood up, still looking aggrieved, as if he knew there was no point in objecting. He glanced at Tomoe, pulled a package out of his bag, and said, “Well, here’s your birthday present then.”

“Ah…” murmured Muimi. “That’s right, you give presents on birthdays…”

“Hm? What was that? What? Come again, Atemiya?” Akiharu sounded so smug you’d think he’d just slain a dragon. “Don’t tell me you forgot to get your dear friend a birthday present! Oh my goodness, I cannot believe it! Is this a joke? Ohh, what to do, what to do? For the love of God, tell us what to do! Huh? Huh? Huh?”

“Cram it, oaf. Isn’t my smile enough?” Muimi said sulkily and headed toward the entrance.

“Hey, wait up! Don’t get mad so easily! What are you, a kid? Ahh, here we go. See ya at school, Emoto! Adieu! Let’s hang out again soon, Ikkun!”

Akiharu gave a light wave and chased after Muimi.

“Bye-bye. See ya again,” reciprocated Tomoe, sluggishly waving

back.

As soon as the two had left, her hands went for the present. She undid the ribbon and carefully opened the wrapping paper.

“I wonder what it is. Ikkun, what do you think it is?” It seemed the alcohol was mostly out of her system. Her cheeks still had a bit of red in them and her voice was a little shrill, but her personality seemed to have returned to its default setting. “I’m a little excited. This kind of thing always makes me giddy.”

“Well, it’s probably not yatsuhashi,” I said. Incidentally, the ones I’d brought had been evenly divided among the stomachs of all five party members. “Judging from the size, it’s an accessory or something.”

“Yeah, maybe. Oh, it’s a neck strap. Pretty cool, huh?”

It was a capsule-style neck strap with a liquid center. It didn’t really look like a girly item, but as Tomoe said, it was pretty cool.

“Heheheh, it’s just what I was hoping for,” she noted happily and immediately tried it on. “How does it look, Ikkun?”

“It’s a good match,” I told her, but I didn’t really know.

My eyes made their way from the gushing Tomoe over to Mikoko, who was snoozing in the corner. She looked so peaceful that I couldn’t bear to wake her. Perhaps she was planning to just spend the night at her friend’s place.

“Hey, Ikkun,” Tomoe said, suddenly straightening herself out. “Thanks again for coming all the way out here today.”

“I don’t think it’s the kind of thing you have to thank me for.”

“But you don’t like doing this kind of thing, do you?”

She posed the awkward question almost as if it was nothing and delicately raised her face to view my expression.

As though…

She hoped to see through me.

Or peek at my brain from inside.

“Uh, no, I…”

“You don’t like opening up to other people, do you?”

“It’s all right. I don’t hate it. I actually kind of like goofing around with everyone.”

“That’s a lie.”

“It’s the truth.”

“It’s a lie.”

“Yes, it is.”

She snickered. But her eyes weren’t smiling all that much. They actually looked sad and lonely. The strange combination of expressions had me puzzled.

What was wrong?

What reason could she have for looking so sad?

She’d spent her birthday surrounded by friends.

If there was one□

“Mikoko is…” Tomoe glanced at her slumbering friend. “A really… really great girl.”

“Yeah.” I was being unusually direct in response. “I bet.”

“I wanted to be like her.”

“Uh huh.”

“But I couldn’t.”

“Uh huh…”

Tomoe sighed and cast down her eyes. “And here I am, twenty years old and still unable to be like her. I’m sure it’ll go on like that. No matter how many years pass, no matter how many decades, until the day I die, I’ll never be like her.”

“What’s wrong with that? Everyone’s different.”

“Hey, Ikkun,” she asked, looking up again, “have you ever felt like you’re defective as a person?”

“…”

“I have.”

She said it with a smile. It was the saddest smile I’d ever seen.

“Everybody…” I blurted out.

I couldn’t even tell whether or not my clichéd words of comfort came from my heart. I was mouthing them emptily just so I wouldn’t have to see her sad face.

What a slimeball.

How comical.

How terribly unseemly.

“Everyone feels like that sometimes, I suppose. Nobody’s perfect. We’ve all got strengths and weaknesses. That’s what makes us human.”

“Yeah, I understand,” she responded. “Even I understand that, but I think you know that’s not what I’m talking about. It’s something more decisive, more lethal

“Like a fatal wound.”

Badump.

The words shook me.

“That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about.”

“…”

So this was the real reason I couldn’t read Tomoe Emoto very well?

In other words, since long ago, she□

“There’s another me here.” Tomoe pointed over her own right shoulder. “Even when I get all rowdy and have fun with Muimi and Akiharu and Mikoko and you like this, that part of me is just watching on and saying, Yeah right. It looks down on me with cold disdain as I have my fun and says: Like that’ll get you anywhere.”

“…”

“Yeah right,” Tomoe sighed as herself. “I know I’ll probably never be like Mikoko until the day I die, but maybe I’ll pull it off once I do die. If I’m reincarnated, I want to come back as Mikoko. I want to be able to laugh with complete innocence like her, but also to get mad when I want to be mad, and to cry like crazy when I’m sad, and to enjoy my life.”

“Me…” This time I was speaking from the heart. “I don’t want to be reincarnated. I want to just hurry up and die.”

“I’m sure,” Tomoe said with a gentle smile.

Mikoko woke up around an hour later.

“Uhhh,” she shook the sleep out of her head. She still looked pretty tired.

“So what’re you going to do?” I asked. “I’m going home. Are you going to stay the night?”

“No, I’ll go…” She rose to her feet in a daze. “It’s okay, I’ve sobered up. Give me ten more seconds.”

“Sure. I’ll take you home, then.”

I’m at least that much of a man, I appended, but she didn’t seem to get it. She’d been deeply immersed in sleep when Muimi left, so that made sense.

“Well, bye-bye, Tomoe.”

“Yep. See ya later.”

Tomoe gave a little wave.

I took my bag and headed toward the entrance. I sat down in the doorway and put on my shoes. They had messy laces, so putting them on was always much more of a hassle than removing them. Situations like these were an irritating waste of time. Meanwhile, Mikoko seemed to be having problems with her own footwork, and a clumsy clopping noise came through the door separating us. It probably wasn’t anything to worry about. She appeared in the hallway outside the entrance shortly after me.

“Ohh,” she moaned, rubbing her head. “My head hurts… It’s spinning. It’s like, Murder at a convenience store, only the murderer was wearing Rollerblades.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying. Are you sure you don’t want to stay here for the night? There’s no need to push it.”

“It’s okay, I can go.”

She hobbled down the hall on unsteady feet. I gave a shrug and followed after her.

“So did you have fun?” she said once we were out of the building.

“Eh, I guess. But I think I’ll pass next time.”

“Don’t say that. Let’s do it again! With everyone! When’s your birthday?”

“March.”

She looked defeated. “Mine’s in April. Ohh, I guess I should’ve invited you sooner.”

“So where’s your place? I’ll take you back.”

“Near Horikawa. Horikawa Oike. But we’ve got to go to your place first.”

“Why?”

“My scoot.”

Come to think of it, she had come over to my place on her scooter. “You sure you can ride one now?”

“I am…”

“Fine.” She didn’t seem to be in any condition to, but since she said she could, who was I to stop her? If necessary we could just hail a cab.

We took Nishioji Street up to Nakadachiuri and broke east, when for some reason, David Bowie music started playing from somewhere. Surprised, I looked around for a guerrilla concert, but it turned out to be Mikoko’s ringtone.

“Hm?” She pulled her phone out of her purse. “Hello? This is Mikoko, the spunky and energetic girl of Lake Ashi! Hm? What? Tomo?” It seemed it was a call from Tomo. “Yeah. Yeah… Yeah, he’s here with me right now. He’s walking right in front of me. Sure, I guess. Okay, I’ll pass it over.”

She passed me the phone. “It’s Tomo. She wants to speak to you.”

“Me? Why?”

“I dunno.”

“…”

Did I forget something at her place? I scratched my head and took the phone. It was more than a little smaller than my own, so it felt

kind of awkward.

“Hello?”

“…”

“Hello?”

“Ikkun.”

A voice.

It was reedy, like she was afraid of something. It could’ve been that we were on the phone, but something in her voice was obviously different from when we’d spoken moments earlier at her place.

“Tomoe?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong? Did I forget something? I’ve got my bag here.”

“No, it’s not that. Um… I forgot to tell you something.”

Forgot to tell? “Sure, what?”

“Never mind. See you.”

Click.

Suddenly the call was cut off. Beeeep. Beeeep. Beeeep. Beeeep. After four rings, I took the phone away from my ear and stared at it for another three seconds, my head tilted in puzzlement. Finally I returned the device to Mikoko with a “Thanks.”

“Sure,” she said, taking it. “So what’d she say?”

“Nothing… I don’t know what that was about.”

“Huh?”

She gave me a confused expression, but I was the one who was confused. Tomoe wanted to tell me something? Why would she

start and then stop like that?

“Whaaat,” pressed Mikoko. “What was that? A secret? Did you guys have some kind of secret talk?”

“No, nothing of the sort… By the way, Mikoko,” I changed the subject. “Is there somebody right here?” I drew a circle with my finger over her right shoulder.

“Hmm?” She raised a dubious eyebrow at me. Naturally.

“I mean, do you get the feeling someone is right there, looking down on you?”

“I don’t think so, but…why?”

“If you don’t, that’s totally fine.”

“If somebody was, it’d be pretty scary.” Then, as if she’d just remembered, she pointed to her heart and said, “But as for in here, there’s somebody.”

A-ha, I nodded. Judging from her bashful smirk, she must have meant her boyfriend.

We arrived at my apartment building in about ten minutes. The parking lot had only one scooter, so it had to be hers.

“Whoa, it’s a Vespa.” A white vintage model, no less. This girl called her Vespa a “scoot”? A Vespa is a Vespa, and only a Vespa. Calling it a “scoot” was, to me, an insult□not just your everyday insult, but an ultimate insult that threatened to shake my very existence. Everyone has one thing that they’d sacrifice their life for, that they’d trade the world for, and to me, this was that thing. I wanted to yell at Mikoko. I angrily turned to face her.

“…”

She was asleep.

“That does leave me speechless…”

She was sleeping standing up. True, she had been awfully quiet for a while. Was it possible that she'd been sleepwalking? That had to be it. Ooh, I was witnessing the absolute limit of humanity's potential. I gave her a few taps on the cheek, but she refused to wake up. I had the urge to start stretching her face, but there'd be no way to explain my way out of it if somebody happened to see us, so I restrained myself.

"Not that I could just leave her here…"

In which case, there were only two options: giving, or taking.

Hup, I grunted, lifting her onto my back. She stirred a little bit midway but didn't wake up. Likely because she was so short, she was pretty light. Or maybe girls were in general.

With her still on my back, I entered the apartment building and made my way up the stairs to the second floor. I clomped my way down the planked hallway to the room next to my own.

I knocked lightly.

"Yeah, wait one moment," an answer came from inside.

Miiko soon appeared before us. She was dressed in yet a different set, red this time, of traditional casual wear. I was pretty sure this was the outfit with the word Treachery printed on the back.

"Hm?" She eyed the girl on my back suspiciously. After a moment's thought, she said, "Of course I'll let you hide here, but speaking purely out of kindness, I suggest you turn yourself in. Japan has a pretty capable police force. Not likely that you'll be able to escape."

"Oh, it's nothing like that this time. Um… This girl is my classmate. Looks like she drank too much and passed out. Would you be willing to let her spend the night?"

"Huh?" Miiko put her hand to her chin and gave it some thought. "Why can't she stay in your room?"

"Well, I mean, as you can see, she's a girl. And it sounds like she's got a boyfriend, so I can't just have her sleeping over in my room."

“Huh. Sure, if that’s how it is, I guess I don’t mind. But what is given today I will one day receive. To ignore thanks where they’re due is a dastardly deed.”

“I gotcha. Want to go antiquing again?”

“Yes. I’m glad you understand. So what’s this girl’s name?”

“Mikoko. Last name…Aoi, I think.”

“Mikoko Aoi? Heh, strange name.” With that, she took custody of my classmate. Everyone should have a big sis of a neighbor who’s as dependable as Miiko.

“Well, I’ll be on my way then.”

“Mm. Get some sleep. You’d best not make yourself out to be an afternoon-sleeping lollygagger.”

“Huh? I never sleep in the afternoon.”

“Is that so? Well, then forget it. Good night.”

“Good night.”

I bowed and returned to my room, where I laid down my futon and curled up on it.

“Time to sleep.”

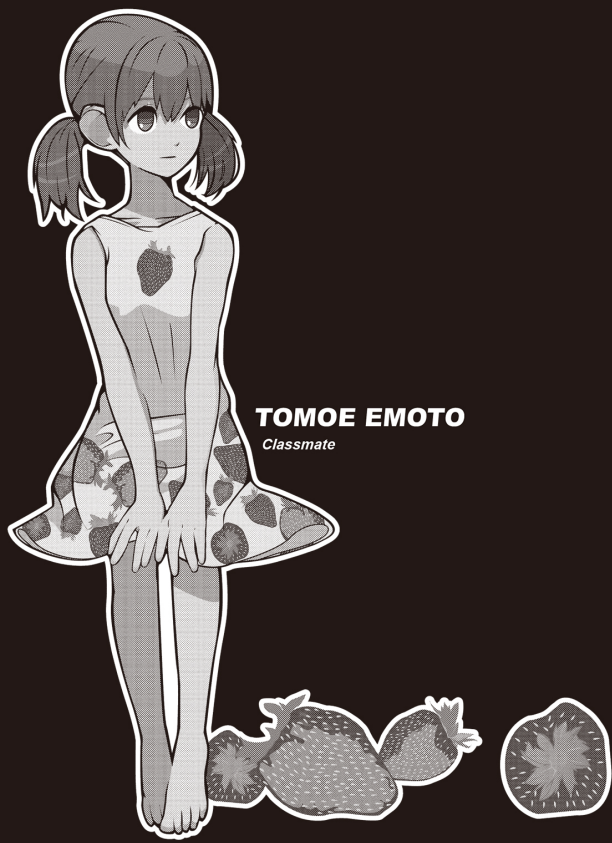
And so the day ended. Saturday, May fourteenth. No, it was already past midnight, so it was Sunday the fifteenth. At twelve o’clock twenty-four hours later, it would be the sixteenth. The next twelve o’clock would be the seventeenth.

Twelve o’clock. Zero o’clock.

Zerozaki.

Wondering if he, no longer human, was killing his seventh person or perhaps disassembling his eighth, the defective product fell into a slumber.

Chapter 3
AGE OF THE CLAIRVOYANT MAN
—(Serial Killer)



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No more.

I don’t want to think anymore.

1

When I awoke to a knocking at the door, it was already past eight o’clock.

I brushed the hair out of my face with both hands and rose to my feet.

“Uhhh.”

I opened the door to find Mikoko. Her usual hyper greeting was replaced with a shy look of apologetic embarrassment. “Did I wake you?” she asked meekly.

“Nah, I was getting up anyway,” I answered as I stretched out. “Morning, Mikoko.”

“Good morning, Ikkun. Um… Sorry about yesterday. I sort of, uh□fell asleep.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just be sure to thank Miiko.”

“Ah, right.” Mikoko nodded after a moment of ambiguous

hesitation.

“She’s very kind, yeah?”

“Well, yeah, very kind. Cool, I guess you could say. So is she the ‘swordswoman with part-time jobs’ you were talking about?”

“Does she look like a thirteen-year-old little sister?”

“No, I guess not.” Mikoko awkwardly broke eye contact with me and paused for a moment before wondering out loud, “Is it because she practices sword fighting? Her clothes are kind of weird. Sort of Japanesey, like the kind of thing you’d wear to a festival.”

“You mean her jinbei?”

“A jinbei? What’s that?” Evidently Mikoko had never heard of it. “You mean like a ‘jinbei’ shark?”

“Uhh, well, yeah.” That was what whale sharks went by in Japanese. “Have you ever seen the pattern on their back? It’s like they’re wearing it. So we ended up naming that kind of clothing jinbei.”

“Ahh. You sure know a lot, Ikkun.” She sounded impressed. “I’ll have to teach that to Tomo and the others.”

Yep. And if they weren’t as cruel as me, they might teach her the truth. Why did I tell such meaningless lies? Perhaps it was time I gave that some serious thought.

“So anyway,” Mikoko said, changing the subject. “Are you close to her□Miss Asano?”

“She’s saved me from starvation a few times. But then I saved Miiko from being crushed under a pile of antiques, so we’re even Steven. Those yatsuhashi you had yesterday were from her too.”

“Huh,” Mikoko said with a complicated expression. “You know, I don’t really like yatsuhashi.”

“Oh? You don’t say.”

“Too sweet.”

“Ah. Miiko likes sweet stuff.”

“Well, I don’t!”

For some reason, Mikoko was getting a little serious. I scratched my head, not sure where she was going with this. “Fine, fine. So what are you going to do now?”

“Oh, uh, I have this,” she said, pulling a pink-wrapped present from her purse. “It’s Tomo’s birthday present. Forgot to give it to her. Big mistake, huh? I should’ve given it to her before we all got drunk! I got carried away trying to get things going.”

“Hm. Well, why not go give it to her now? She should be home.”

“Yup, that’s the plan.” At last, Mikoko showed her trademark smile. “Well, thank you. Let’s get together again.”

“We’ll see.”

“Why do you say stuff like that?! Let’s do something!”

“Just kidding. Fine by me. If I’ve got time, I’ll spend as much of it with you as you want, so please invite me again.”

I only said it to be polite, but seeing Mikoko’s face light up, the guilt kicked in. Thinking she’d probably burst into tears or rage if I said “just kidding” again, I instead told her, “See you next time.”

She gave a big, energetic nod and spun on her heels.

Something came to my mind. “Hey, Mikoko. Just one more thing.”

“Hm?! What is it, Ikkun?”

“Call a Vespa a Vespa. Calling it a scoot is just offensive, so knock it off.”

“Whoa, Ikkun giving an order?! Isn’t that like, A casual-attire prep school where all the students show up in uniforms anyway?!”

“You got it or not?”

“Wow, you’re as scary as Muimi…”

She seriously seemed a little scared. Maybe I’d been childish. But I had to be firm or she wouldn’t get it.

“Okay,” she consented, “I’ll be careful from now on.” She made her way down the hall, but when she reached the corner, she turned back around. “Hey! I’ve got something I want to say to you too!”

“Huh? What?”

She took a big breath. “My last name is Aoii! Not Aoi! I told you not to forget!”

I wanted to tell her I knew, but then I realized that I’d introduced her to Miiko as “Mikoko Aoi.” Miiko was the kind of person who was hard to correct once a piece of information entered her brain (thanks to me, she still believed Shakespeare was a McShake flavor), so she must have spent the morning going Aoi, Aoi, Aoi. Maybe not in sets of three, but you know what I mean.

The difference between Aoi and Aoii didn’t seem like such a big deal, but it was probably fairly rude to think so. We’re as proud of our family names as the Italians are.

“Okay. I won’t forget again. I promise.”

“Fine, then. Also…” She turned halfway back around. “I don’t have a boyfriend,” she said softly before rushing down the stairs as if trying to escape.

“Huh?”

I probably looked more than a little confused.

Umm…

What the heck?

Was this also via Miiko? I did recall telling her something of that

nature: My classmate can't stay in my room because she has a boyfriend. But Miiko, she…

"I don't go around regurgitating every little detail like that."

Whoa. Miiko was standing next to me, and I hadn't noticed.

"Who goes around shouting in the hallway of a dilapidated apartment building? Never mind that everyone can hear you from their rooms, the whole place's gonna come down."

"Sorry…"

"Now then, I have to go to work. Let's hope that classmate of yours learns to mind her p's and q's."

With that, Miiko shuffled her way down the hall. There was something frightening about the fact that Rage was written on the back of her blue jinbei. Maybe she and Mikoko hadn't gotten along so well. Their names were a little too similar and all.

But yeah, it did raise questions about the Aoi business.

"Maybe she was actually awake last night…"

Sleeping while standing up is one thing, but walking around while asleep isn't all that easy. The absolute limit of human potential isn't something you witness every day. Maybe Mikoko had been awake, how lucid she may or may not have been at the time notwithstanding. Maybe that was why she knew I'd mistaken her name and also said she had a boyfriend.

Hmm, did she simply think that going back to her own home was a bother?

She could've said so, seriously, without pretending to be asleep. Some people sure do strange things, I mused as I went back inside.

2

Now then.

It was precisely that evening when the story started getting altogether tiresome.

As I was alone in my room reading a fat book I had checked out from the college library, a wild knocking came at my door. It's only natural to be irritated when someone interrupts your valued quiet time like this, but having become rather accustomed to this kind of thing by now, I wasn't particularly angry. Wondering if the fifteen-year-old big brother and hell worshipper had come to ask for money again, I opened the door.

"Oh."

It was an older guy and a woman I had never seen before.

There was something particularly peculiar about the guy. He was probably in his mid-to-late thirties, and not so much tall as long-legged. Moreover, he had his hair slicked back. Well, that aside, even in this heat he was dressed in a black suit and tie. It was a disturbingly bizarre way to be dressed. He even had sunglasses on. If he were a foreigner, I would've been afraid it was the MIB here to erase my memory.

The woman, on the other hand, was dressed in a slightly more normal suit and tight skirt. She had straight, black hair and was relatively pretty. But the look in her eyes was not ordinary. Without a hint of the reserve you'd expect from a first meeting, they met mine with a penetrating, gouging gaze.

She took a step forward.

"If I may," she said, flashing a badge. "I'm Sasaki Sasa, Kyoto Prefectural Police, Investigation Section One."

What a tongue twister of a name. Her parents must have been awfully whimsical.

“Okay. Hi,” I gave a little head bob for the time being.

The woman, Sasaki, seemed a bit surprised by my reaction. Maybe I should’ve betrayed more surprise myself, but it was obvious at first glance that they were police officers. These two stone-faced individuals being anything else was, to me, unimaginable.

The older guy chuckled to himself and showed his own badge. “Kazuhito Ikaruga, also from Section One. Mind if we come inside for a bit?” It was essentially coercion in the form of a question. As a kid, I naturally felt the urge to defy him, but it didn’t look like this Kazuhito would let it fly.

“Oh, uh, well, sure. It’s cramped, though.”

I invited them into the room. They seemed taken aback that the interior was just as cramped as I warned, but they passed it off with an impressive coolness. If I were their boss, I would’ve given them a raise. Of course, not being their boss, I didn’t give them squat.

“Please, have a seat over there,” I bid them. I poured tap water into two cups and placed them in front of the pair. Just like Mikoko the day before, they completely ignored my attempt at hospitality.

“Allow me to cut to the chase,” Sasaki said, eyeing me firmly. “Tomoe Emoto is dead.”

“Oh.” I prepared myself a glass of water and sat down across from them. “Is that right?”

“‘Is that right?’ Is that all you have to say?” Sasaki broke her poker face for the first time.

“Oh, well, I’m not much for expressing emotion. I’m totally stunned on the inside, so don’t pay it any mind.”

That and, by this point, I was becoming kind of used to this sort of thing.

I really was stunned, though. This was half because Tomoe had been killed, and half because I'd assumed the instant I'd seen the two outside my door that they'd come to ask about Zerozaki.

Half-relaxing, half-stupefied□nearly contradictory emotions swirled around in my gut.

"Umm, given that detectives are on the case, I suppose she didn't die under ordinary circumstances. Plus, if you're from Section One…"

They handled homicides, mainly.

"That's correct." Sasaki nodded, her expression the picture of solemnity.

"So was it, by any chance, the prowler?"

"No," she shook her head at my inquiry.

"Oh, really."

That was a bit deflating. Part of me was relieved. I couldn't help but wonder why, but I quickly switched trains of thought.

"What happened, then?"

"Her body was found this morning. She had been strangled to death."

"Strangled?"

Strangulation.

Tomoe Emoto.

Murdered…

I felt my heart going cold.

Just how many people had died around me? How long ago did I stop counting? My first encounter with death was before I could even remember.

“It’s been about a month since the last one… That’s got to be a new record.”

“Huh?” Sasaki tilted her head.

Exuding intellect, not cute in any way, it was so unlike Mikoko’s version of the gesture. Then again, whether it be from a male or a female, I’ve never seen a pose that exudes both intelligence and cuteness.

“Did you say something?” asked the detective.

“No, just talking to myself. I do that a lot. They say I’m just a nineteen-year-old soliloquy that can dress itself and walk around.”

Although she didn’t crack so much as a smirk, she seemed satisfied with this answer.

Then I noticed□

Kazuhito was closely monitoring my expression from who knew when.

“……”

Interesting.

That explained the need for sunglasses. Sasaki did the talking; Kazuhito observed. What marvelous nonsense. A riot, he would have termed it.

It seemed I was a prime suspect.

“Naturally… I was with her all night.”

“Did you say something?”

“No, just your plain old nonsense.” I sat up straight. Not that I was nervous, but maybe it was time to start getting a little more serious.

“So if she was killed, who killed her?” I asked.

“That’s currently under investigation. Actually, that’s the reason we’ve come here today,” replied Sasaki.

Actually my ass, I wanted to say, but refrained from provoking her.

“You were in Emoto’s apartment from about six in the evening to midnight. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Just to confirm, would you tell us the names of the other individuals present then?”

“Umm.” Good luck, memory. “Tomoe Emoto, Muimi Atemiya, Mikoko Aoi…no, Aoii, and Akiharu Usami. And then me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You arrived with Aoii. Is that correct?”

“Yes. First she came to my place□here, I mean□then we went to Emoto’s place together. It was around six p.m.”

“More specifically? Was it before six or after?”

“…Before.”

She was barraging me with questions. The limitations of my mind’s processing speed were already being exploited, and my head was spinning.

“And the guests there at that time were□”

“Please wait a minute,” I interrupted. “I can’t focus if you keep throwing out questions one after another like that. As I think I mentioned, this all has me a little mixed up.”

“Oh, pardon me,” Sasaki said, not all that apologetically.

I spent the next hour responding to her interrogation, divulging every last detail of the previous night's events. The things we talked about during the party. The atmosphere of the party. My going to the convenience store with Muimi. Returning. Akiharu and Muimi leaving at around eleven o'clock. Akiharu giving Tomoe a present just before that. The neck strap. My talk with Tomoe after that. Leaving the apartment with Mikoko in tow. The phone call from Tomoe around the time we reached Nishioji Nakadachiuri. Leaving Mikoko, who appeared to be sleeping (whether she really was or not), with Miiko. And then, sleeping. Mikoko's short visit in the morning. The rest of the day, which I spent reading.

Sasaki was already plenty scary on her own, but Kazuhito exerted his own pressure the entire time, peering over her shoulder and through his sunglasses. We were just sitting and talking, but I felt like I'd expended a great deal of energy. And then there was Sasaki's brilliant last line.

"Okay, it pretty much matches what we already know."

Boy, she was super.

The string of questions seemed to have come to an end for the time being. Hmm, Sasaki expressed her perplexion. Something about it seemed like an act. If Mikoko was a person of no façades, this woman was nothing but façades to the point that they seemed like her personality.

She certainly wasn't easy to deal with.

"About that call…" Sasaki said with a finger to her temple. "She really didn't say anything? According to Aoii, Emoto specifically asked her to pass you the phone, which would suggest that she had something to say to you."

"She began to tell me something, but didn't. She just said 'never mind' and hung up."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

“And it was definitely Emoto on the phone?”

“Yes. I never mistake voices of people I know.”

Sasaki exchanged glances with Kazuhito behind her. It looked like they were done and about to be on their way, but I couldn’t sit idly by in silence.

“Umm, may I ask a question, Sasaki?”

“…Huh?” Her poker face broke down once again. I, a younger person (and a male) she’d just met had addressed her by her first name, so it would’ve been stranger if she weren’t surprised.

“Something’s been bothering me.”

“Um…” She exchanged another glance with Kazuhito, and he responded with nothing more than a slight drop of his jaw. Apparently a sign of consent, she turned back toward me and said, “Okay.”

The approval was most likely not spurred by any sympathy for a boy whose classmate had just been murdered, but by a mean calculation that my question might be revealing. Not that I cared.

“Well… By any chance, was Aoii the one who discovered the body?”

“That’s correct,” Sasaki answered coolly, providing no further explanation. It seemed she had no intention of telling me anything that I didn’t ask. Nor, of course, was she about to tell me anything just because I asked.

Still, I was right. So she went to drop off Tomoe’s birthday present, which had slipped her mind, but there was no answer. She tried calling, but nobody picked up. The door to the building had an autolock, but surely that was easy enough to get around. All she had to do was follow one of the residents inside. In that sense, it hardly even passed as a lock.

Hmm…

Mikoko.

At that moment, what had she felt?

What emotions had an emotional person like her experienced?

“Maybe I should’ve gone with her…”

But how could I have known?

Besides, I wasn’t confident that my being there with her would have helped any. I’m not much of a man. In fact, I might have ended up being her enemy.

“Is that your only question?”

“No, I’ve got a few more. What was the time of death?”

“We’ve determined that it was sometime between eleven p.m. on the fourteenth and three a.m. on the fifteenth.”

“In that case…” Since Mikoko and I left the apartment at midnight, the crime must have occurred between midnight and three a.m. “Um, you said she was strangled? There was no knife or anything?”

“That’s what I said.”

Why a knife? the slender-eyed lady asked back.

Of course I didn’t tell her, not even with my eyes, that I knew a certain knife-wielding serial killer.

“Was it a rope?”

“It was a thin piece of cloth. She most likely died instantly from vascular compression. I doubt she suffered much.”

This was the first considerate, human remark on Sasaki’s part so far. Yet to me, whether Tomoe suffered or not was relatively trivial. Either way, she was dead.

I know what dying is about.

It isn't death that people fear.

What they're afraid of is nothingness.

The pain is nothing more than an add-on.

Despair, nothing more than an accessory.

"Um, have you already gone to everyone else?"

"Everyone else?" echoed Sasaki, when she knew damn well what I meant.

"Everyone who was gathered at Emoto's place last night. Usami, Atemiya, and Aoii."

I asked this without any particular expectations. I figured she wouldn't even answer. But to my surprise, she immediately said, "Well, yes… We've finished questioning all of them. Your address was a little hard to find, so we ended up coming here at such a late hour."

"What was everyone doing during that window of time when Emoto was killed?"

Step.

I cautiously waded into it.

Sasaki's lips curled up into a vague smirk. "Usami and Atemiya say they spent the night singing karaoke in Shijokawara-machi. As for Aoii, it probably goes without saying."

It did. Mikoko stayed with Miiko in the room next door.

I could relax a little. If Sasaki were to be believed, the top three suspects all had alibis. Akiharu and Muimi were friends vouching for each other, so it wasn't exactly watertight but enough to ease any suspicions toward them.

Then□

I felt the pressure of Kazuhito's gaze grow stronger.

"Tch…"

How unseemly.

This late in the game, I found myself breaking eye contact with both Sasaki and him.

Dammit… They'd sensed my relief. The fact that they did also meant they'd seen through my lowered guard. How careless of me. Relaxing around detectives, let alone this pair, was never a good idea.

Shit… What had they glimpsed?

"Is that all, then?" prompted Sasaki, without altering her tone even a little.

"Oh, no. One more thing."

Speaking of fails, this was it.

Kazuhito's penetrating gaze was a subtle detail in comparison.

But flustered by the subtle detail□

I asked a question I didn't need to ask.

That I shouldn't have.

I asked□

"Who do you suppose did it?"

The question had been answered.

Already.

And I'd gone and repeated it.

"That's currently under investigation," Sasaki replied with a suggestive gaze, with the smile of a huntress who'd bagged her mark. She rose to her feet. "Pardon us for intruding for so long. I think we'll want to speak to you again," she said, placing her calling card on the floor, "but if you remember anything else, please give us a call."

I took the card in my hand. It had the number for the prefectural police as well as a cell phone's.

"Well, take care, Mr. Student," Kazuhito said with a smirk and began to make his way out of my room.

Interesting… That was the real deception, then. I'd committed such a fatal blunder that I didn't even deserve to call myself a passive bystander anymore. I had completely mixed up the roles of the two detectives.

In other words, it had been Kazuhito's job to rush me along.

Sasaki's had been to lie in wait.

What's more, she'd shown an opening purposely there at the end, inviting me to attack.

The gall. The utter audacity.

"Oh, by the way," Sasaki said as if just remembering something. "About your alibi. For the time being, it's been confirmed by your neighbor, Asano. She said you can hear people walking down the hallway from inside the rooms."

So long, she flashed me a refined smile.

This was essentially a checkmate.

No, it wasn't even total defeat.

The woman had the nerve to hand me a farewell gift to finish.

Well, son of a bitch.

I don't know if it was because I hadn't dealt with them for a while, but I had completely underestimated the Japanese police. Did my arrogance know no bounds? Who the hell did I think I was?

I hadn't tasted such humiliation since my run-in with the flaming red contractor.

I bit my lower lip.

"Kazuhito," I called out as the guy was leaving. He looked back. "If you were better-looking, you'd be a dead ringer for Yusaku Matsuda," I told him.

"Guess that means I'm not a dead ringer for Yusaku Matsuda."

It was a bull's-eye answer. My last hopeless jab had been a big whiff, and with that, the two detectives were on their way. I cleared away the cups and plopped myself onto the floor.

I was supremely conscious that I had lost.

I hadn't felt that way in a month, and not so strongly in a whole year. But in this case I could just ignore the sting of defeat. It was nothing, given that someone had died.

"Tomoe," I tried whispering aloud.

The first thing to come to mind was our conversation from the previous night.

"Have you ever felt like you're defective as a person?"

That… That's not something to put into words, ever, Tomoe.

Not if you're like us.

As long as you don't know it, you can go on living like normal.

As long as you aren't aware of it, you can concoct a modicum of happiness.

We're like an airplane that's lost its engine and wings. We're nothing but silent crows that can only glide.

Once you question that, it's all over.

This isn't about denial. This is about ignoring it.

"When you ask such a thing…you can get killed." As someone with experience, I wasn't going to dish out empty condolences. "If you try, even people like us can… No, if you don't try, actually."

It was no use for me, who'd been trying for a very long time, and pointless for Tomoe, who'd ended up trying, too, ages ago.

I closed my eyes.

And I opened them.

"Well, so much for spirit."

I swiftly rose to my feet.

Now then.

What to do? There weren't too many things that I needed to do, but plenty of things that I wanted to do. For me, this was a fairly rare condition.

First, I took out my cell phone. Consulting its call history, I began to dial Mikoko's number. But halfway through, I stopped myself.

"Seriously, who the hell do I think I am?"

It was utter nonsense.

If I did call Mikoko, what would I say to her? It'd end up being irresponsible no matter what.

That could come later.

At the moment, I didn't have the right words for her.

"In that case…"

I'd attend to what I needed to do.

Reset. I entered a different number. It was the only one I knew by heart. Wondering how long it had been since we'd talked, I put my phone to my ear. The call went through soon enough.

"Hiii! Iichan! Long time no hear! Do you love me today, too~?"

Her hyperness exceeded Mikoko's by about twelve levels. Her stopper had been removed, so there was no limit. If you weren't mindful, she reached for the heavens like the Tower of Babel.

"What oh what oh what oh what is wrong? You never call me! This moment is monumental! It's the Himeji Castle! It must be a diversionary tactic! Hyaooo! I wanna snap a photo, but it won't capture sound so there'd be no point! Commence audio recording!"

"Audio recording aside," I kept my cool.

As I'd told Muimi when she asked me if it was tough keeping up with Mikoko, dealing with my classmate was a piece of cake compared to managing a certain individual.

If Mikoko was happy-go-lucky, then Tomo Kunagisa was lightning in a broken bottle.

"Tomo, are you free much these days?"

"Nope! More on the busy side. Extremely occupado. My processing power is facing an imminent meltdown! Emergency memory expansion! Defrag imperative! I'm going to freeze! Oh my God, it's happening! It's happening! Present progressive tense! Please reboot!"

"Because of the Kyoto prowler case?"

"Bingo! Wowww! You're like Maki! Or the red contractor! Kyahahahahaha! Return of the ESP! Aaand Forever! Humanity's strongest! This is the End!"

"Sorry, Tomo, could you dial it down a notch?"

“Huh? What’s wrong? Well, whatever. Yep, it’s the Kyoto prowler case! But you know what? It’s not going the way I expected! This darn case! Hurdles! Serious hurdles! The culprit must be the reincarnation of Dread Jones! Wahaha!”

“Let’s make a deal, Tomo Kunagisa,” I said. “I’ll give you some info on this Kyoto prowler case. You’ll give me info on a certain murder.”

“Huh…”

Kunagisa thought for a moment.

She wasn’t going to ask me what info I could have about the prowler case or why I was interested in the murder.

I believed in her, and she trusted me.

Unnecessary explanations.

Excess clarifications.

Wasteful dissertations.

Inane questions.

The best thing about Kunagisa was that she didn’t demand idle talk.

“Ehh, I don’t like this word deal, Iichan.”

“How’s bargain?”

“Awful.”

“Pact?”

“Almost there.”

“Conspiracy?”

“Not technically wrong, but something’s off.”

“What about complementing each other?”

“Yeah, that’ll do,” Kunagisa said happily.

Giving, or taking?

At this point, I still hadn’t decided.

3

After finishing my call with Kunagisa, I went to visit Miiko next door. I knocked.

Yo, came her response, and several seconds later, the door opened. As usual, she was dressed in a jinbei. If she was going to take such an avid interest in traditional clothing, she ought to get herself a nice, pretty kimono. It definitely would look good on her.

“Can I help you?”

“Oh, I just wanted to thank you. They said you vouched for my alibi.”

“I didn’t do anything remarkable. I just told the truth.”

“Yeah, but I burdened you.”

“I don’t care. Happens all the time… But you’ve dealt with your fair share of nuisances, haven’t you?” She sounded more appalled than concerned. “You’re like some man of a thousand disasters. What about that girl? Based on what the authorities were saying, she was involved too.”

“Well…we could discuss that in time…”

“Gotcha,” she nodded. “And? How do you intend on thanking me?”

“I’ll treat you to tea.”

This wasn’t an invitation to go to a coffee shop but literally about tea. It was a Kyoto thing, or maybe just a Miiko thing.

“With dango?” she asked after the availability of rice-flour dumplings.

“Not to mention hiyashi shiruko.” Sweet red bean soup, too.

“Where at?”

“The Oharame-ya in Gion.”

Miiko’s eyes lit up. “Hold on, I’ll get ready.”

She shut the door. For what it was worth, she was considerate enough to change into normal clothes when she was going out with somebody else. That level of thoughtfulness made her a pretty rare specimen in my circle of acquaintances.

“And I’m back.”

A minute later she was ready to leave. She handed me a car key. I flipped it over in the palm of my hand before clutching it tight.

4

Eight o'clock in the evening rolled around. Tea with Miiko had ended and I found myself walking between Shijo and Oike on Kawara-machi Street. Miiko had already driven her Fiat back home.

"Don't use me just to kill time and save on shoe leather."

Those were the words she'd left me with.

She saw right through me, all right. Miiko was sharp after her own manner. You had to hand it to her for accepting my invitation anyway, which made her a good person. Or maybe she just had a sweet tooth.

I came to a stop and entered a nearby karaoke spot.

"Welcome," the guy behind the counter said. "Party of one?"

"Umm, I have a friend who should already be here."

"May I have your friend's name, please?"

"Hitoshiki Zerozaki."

"Ehm, Mr. Zerozaki." The employee briefly operated his computer. "Okay, that would be room twenty-four," he said with a sales smile.

I thanked him and made my way to the elevator. Room twenty-four was on the second floor. I got off there and walked down the hall, checking the numbers.

"Dadadadadada dadadadadadadada! Dadadada! Dadadadadadadadadadadadadadadada! Ah! Aah!"

Just as I wondered what bozo would ever go for such a funky song, I realized it was coming from room twenty-four. I gave a little shrug

and opened the door without even knocking.

“Ah.” Zerozaki stopped his belting once he noticed me. “Hi there, Defective Product,” he said, raising a finger.

Not reacting right away, I entered the room and took a seat on the sofa. “Hey, No Longer Human,” I countered.

Zerozaki put down the mic and used the remote control to end the song.

“You can keep singing if you want. You paid for it, didn’t you?”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m not all that into singing, to be honest. Especially not when I’m impersonating. I just do it to kill time.” He sat down so that he was facing me and sighed deeply. “Haven’t seen ya for a day. But, like, it doesn’t really feel that way.”

“True,” I nodded.

Though I did, I was surprised. Until a moment ago, I didn’t believe Zerozaki would be there. Sure, after our conversation the day before yesterday—or rather, yesterday morning—we’d promised. I’ll be at that karaoke joint so let’s meet up, he’d said. But I didn’t think he’d actually show up, and he probably doubted I would. That was precisely why I’d come and why he was waiting.

The meaning of the phrase used to waiting: another warranted contradiction.

From there, just like the night we first crossed paths, we began talking about stuff that didn’t matter. Cheap philosophisizing, boring satori, irrelevant views on life—at times we veered offtrack a bit and discussed music (guessing the cover’s original) or literature (various methods of moving the reader), none of which had any real point. It was as if we were both just trying to verify something.

“Say, Zerozaki,” I asked him around the four-hour mark. “What’s it feel like to kill someone?”

“Huh?” He tilted his head. From his reaction, he didn’t seem to harbor any particular sentiments about the act. “What’s it feel like,

you say? I don't really feel much of anything."

"You don't? It doesn't feel good or refreshing or anything?"

"Dumbass, what do you think I am, some kind of sicko?" he spat with a heaping helping of condescension.

That was rich coming from a perpetrator of grisly murders, but I decided to hear him out.

"'Cuz, it's like this. I mean, I'm a murderer. But I'm not what you'd call a lust murderer. That's a tricky distinction, and I guess it doesn't do any good for me to make that claim anyway. In the end, it's the people around you who decide. All I can do is go along with it. I'm not really one for deep thoughts."

"I see… You might be right. Okay, then how about I rephrase my question—what is murder to you?"

"Nothin'."

I could find two meanings buried in that word.

It was worth nothing.

And therefore, it cost nothing.

"Now here's a question for you, Defective. What's death to you?"

"When you ask me flat-out like that, I'm at a loss. If I had to answer, it's like a battery running out of juice."

"A battery? As in AA and stuff?"

"Yeah, more or less. You could call it vitality. Going by that analogy, you're something of an insulator."

"I guess I've been called worse," he said with a little laugh. He really seemed to be enjoying himself. I wondered if I sounded like him when I laughed.

"Okay. Maybe my question was too vague. How about this, then?

Do you understand why other people kill?”

“Huh? That’s a bizarre one. But very you. Let’s see… Nope.”

“You don’t?”

“Nah. First of all, I don’t understand other people, period. Whether they’re murderers or not, whether they’re serial killers or not. Second of all, I don’t even understand my own feelings. I have no freaking idea what causes all the chaos swirling around in my guts. So all I can say is no, I don’t understand why other people kill.”

“I see your logic there.”

“I might add that murder isn’t what I’m going for,” he said as if it really was just an afterthought.

“What does that mean?”

“If you ask that, it’s going to get awfully conceptual. Okay, well, for example.” He picked up the receiver for the room phone. “Excuse me, could we get two ramens please?”

Not much later, a staff member came in with two bowls.

“Eat up. I’m payin’,” invited Zerozaki, lifting some noodles with his chopsticks. “We’re having a meal.”

“Yup. You didn’t even have to tell me.”

“They say food, sleep, and sex are the three basic desires of mankind. But why do I have meals?”

“To ingest nutrients.”

“Yes. Without nutrients, people die. Hence eating food brings pleasure. Sleeping feels good, too, and sex, well, that’s obvious. Anything that you have to do to live and survive is always accompanied by pleasure.”

“Sure. That’s easy enough to understand. So?”

“Don’t rush me. ‘So? So?’ You sound like Ryu-freaking-nosuke Akutagawa.”

“Huh? Wasn’t that Dazai’s thing?”

“It’s Akutagawa, dammit. It’s an anecdote about Akutagawa, recounted by Dazai.”

What a reaction, whichever literary eminence it was, but I did as told and decided to hear him out again. As if to build up the suspense, he paused for a moment before going on.

“Now let’s imagine someone who’s obsessed with meals. In other words, someone who eats not simply to take in nutrients but who’s mad for the sensation of eating itself, for the beauty of it. The stimulation of his taste buds. The pleasure of the food passing through his mouth. The joy of mastication. The ecstasy of feeling that mushed-up gook flowing down his throat. The fullness nearly destroying his satiety center altogether. The euphoria taking over his brain.”

In other words, I’m talking about a fat guy, glossed Zerozaki, chuckling.

“To him, nutrients or the lack thereof are totally irrelevant,” he continued. “The means and the end have switched places for him so that the original goal is something subsidiary. Here’s the issue. Can you still say the guy is having a meal? No, don’t answer. You and I both know the only possible answer is no. What this guy is doing isn’t eating. He’s just eating the concept of eating.”

“And you’re just killing the concept of killing? That’s a bit of a stretch,” I said with a shrug. “It’s pretty perverse to try to equate a natural appetite for food with an urge to kill. For you, murder is the purpose from the outset, and it’s not like your ends and means got mixed up, right?”

“Ah, I dunno about that. It’s hard to say. Or maybe it’s subtle. Like I’ve been trying to tell you, murder itself is never my intention, nor the stuff that comes afterward, the disassembly.”

“Then what is? Man, you’re a tough guy to understand.”

“Not as much as you. Sure, I know that I’m hard to understand. Like I said. At the beginning I thought I was in it for the thrill.”

“The thrill, huh?”

“Yeah. You’ve heard the phrase high risk, high return before, right? In Japanese, I think we say, ‘If you don’t go into the tiger’s den, you don’t get no cub.’ With murder, the risk is high, but the return is low, wouldn’t you say? It hardly seems worth it. It’s what stupid people do. That’s why murders are almost always cases of going too far or excessive force. They’re not trying to kill the victim, but before they know it, they’ve gone and done it. However…”

He pulled a rather dangerous-looking blade from his vest pocket. “This here is what they call a dagger. You grip it in your fist like this. So the first person I killed, I stuck this thing in his right carotid artery and just tugged it to the side. It was inexcusable homicidal behavior. I had no particular intention of causing the person suffering or pain. My method was rather clearheaded and generous, if you ask me. By no means am I bragging about my past M.O., though. You would know this, but boasting is about the most pathetic thing a person can do. People who brag about their misdeeds are the lowest of the low. I’m just putting out my dirty laundry here. Seriously, I can’t murder in any other kind of way. Even when I went after you, the other side of the mirror.”

“Huh. You don’t say.”

“I do say. Like, let’s imagine that you and I ended up fighting to the death again. Of course, logically speaking, it’s entirely possible that you would kill me. For every time that you do, though, I could kill you nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine times without even giving you the time to feel any pain. Well, in reality you and I each only have one life, so that’s just a black swan of a metaphor. At any rate, I can only kill for the sake of killing. In other words, I can affirm that the eight people I’ve killed up until now weren’t victims of me going too far.”

Eight people□in two days, the body count had risen by two. I guess

Zerozaki had gone about living his life while I'd been living mine.

"So am I stupid? Maybe," he said. "After all, it's not like I'm getting anything out of killing these people. Well, actually, I am. At least whatever's in their wallets."

One of the confounding details of the prowler case was that the victims' valuables were removed. This was rare for "abnormal" lust murders that seemed to have been committed for the thrill of it, but the reason was simple. The homeless Zerozaki needed the cash.

The karaoke fee must have come out of one of those victims' wallets, too. If you looked at it that way, even the ramen was tainted with sin, I thought as I slurped my noodles.

"But I could get that stuff just by working a normal job, so it's no reason to commit murder. If you think about the effort that goes into killing one person, it makes a lot more sense to spend the day doing gigs instead. And yet I choose murder. Which brings us to a hypothesis."

"I get it. In other words, for Hitoshiki Zerozaki, the risk is the return."

"Yup. The means and the end aren't just swapped but identical. The deed itself is the purpose. The deed is precisely the purpose. In achieving my purpose, the deed is complete. It's actually not a bad hypothesis."

"But how is that different from 'losing sight of your purpose'? Take a bibliophile whose room is completely buried in books. Yet he keeps buying new ones. It might be none of our business, but he's got so many books in his room that even if he spent his whole life reading them, he'd never get through them all. Still he keeps on buying more."

"Hmm. Ahhh, ah-ah-ah, I get it, I get it. You're talking about processing capacity. Once you've passed your limit, means and end become one and the same. Reminds me of the legendary thief Goemon Ishikawa. 'A splendid view, a splendid view, how dare they say the sights of spring are worth a thousand gold. I, Goemon,

declare them worth ten thousand.' Hmm. Yeah, maybe so," Zerozaki said with an impressed sigh as he reclined into the sofa. "But, my man, even if that is the case, it doesn't have much to do with me. You know why? Because that earlier hypothesis is so totally wrong to begin with. Risk equals return? Now there's a bullshit equation if I've ever heard one. It's mere sophistry."

"Huh. And where does that leave us?"

"We'll almost be trading in generalities from here," announced Zerozaki, leaning forward. "Let's go back to when I was a little brat. You were a little brat once too, right? So was I. What kind of brat? I wasn't particularly weird or anything. I even believed in God. If I got smacked, it hurt. If I saw someone else get smacked, it hurt. I had your average sensibility. I wanted to bring happiness to my neighbor. I knew gratitude. I knew unconditional affection for another human being. That's the kind of brat I was… But, for instance, I'd be sitting. Not to read a book or to watch TV. I'd just be sitting. Resting my chin in my hands, my mind up in la-la land, just sitting. I'd notice during those times that I was giving thought to how I might kill human creatures as if it were the most natural thing. The first time I realized what I was doing, I was seriously freaked out… I mean, I was pondering, oh-so-normally examining how you would kill someone. I was the one having these thoughts, which scared me most."

"So you became self-aware. But I'm not seeing the generality in that story. If anything, it seems pretty out there to me. You have an innate proclivity to murder, is that it?"

"I said don't rush me. I thought that once myself, but that's not the case at all. I thought I was born with a murderous mindset, with the urge to harm. But that's not it. It's that□and this is where it gets generic□I'm running on rails."

"Rails? What the heck?"

"It's a metaphor. Don't they talk about lives proceeding on some track? You graduate from middle school, you go through high school, you get into college, you support yourself, bag a lover, join a company, get promoted, that kind of track. Likewise, me, I'm on

the murder track."

"Sounds more like you're off the rails to me."

"Like you're one to talk. Anyway, that's not important. The kind of track I'm talking about here isn't necessarily the one set up by society. It might be a pair of rails you've laid down for yourself. If a kid in elementary school becomes obsessed with Ichiro and decides he wants to be a baseball player, at that very moment, he creates a track for himself."

"I see. In that sense, we're all on a track…unless you 'drop out,' I suppose."

Until you suffer a fatal blow.

Until you go tumbling off the rails.

"Yup. I don't know who laid down my rails," Zerozaki said. "I might have done it myself, someone else might have. But in either case, I've gone down this track too far. I've made it too far without suffering a fatal blow, and now there's no stopping me. I don't even entertain the idea of putting on the brakes."

"Ah. That's where it links up."

Which is to say.

He was proceeding now.

And.

The self that started running and the self that is running can never be the same.

"Right," Zerozaki agreed. "It's like a curse from the past. What's more, it's some halfassed path of thorns that's killing me with a thousand cuts. They say living life on a track someone else laid out is boring, but you know, it doesn't make any difference who laid it out if you get sick of it midway through. Not that I could quit at this point. Too many strings attached now."

“Must be even tougher not having anyone to blame.”

“Yup. Especially for an outcast like me.”

“Might as well give it up. You might not have gone off the rails, but you just can’t help living outside the rules.”

“Oh? Says who? You’re no saint.”

“I’m a serious college student, technically. I’m not like you.”

“Don’t you feel empty mouthing those words? How is that different from looking into the mirror and asking, ‘Who are you?’”

True, I nodded.

“Anyway,” Zerozaki said, “that’s why I don’t see myself as a murderer. Because my purpose isn’t murder. They speak of people for whom killing is as easy as breathing, but in my case, not killing is just suffocating. I’m paying the train fare for this track I got on long ago. Or I’m continuing to repay a loan. You could say I’m killing the act of killing.”

“This is all becoming a little too conceptual for me… Can’t you put it more realistically?”

“No can do. I mean, we’re talking concepts here. If we put it in real terms, it’s over at ‘I killed and disassembled someone times eight.’”

“You’re right…” I sighed and looked up at the ceiling. Talking with Zerozaki was interesting enough, and I even learned a thing or two, but the information wasn’t useful. “Hmm. And here I thought a serial killer might best understand the heart of a murderer.”

Come to think of it, though, it was no surprise. After all, the way Zerozaki killed and the way Tomoe got killed were completely different. I didn’t believe for a second that Sasaki had given me the whole scoop, but the bit about Tomoe having been strangled with a thin piece of cloth was probably true. Meanwhile, Zerozaki’s crime was cutting people up with a knife. The similarities began and ended with bringing death to the victim.

He killed indiscriminately.

Tomoe's killer had sought her out.

It was most likely the result of a grudge.

A sort of corrosion occasioned by the sticky, slimy, disgusting relationships that obtain among human beings.

"Hah? What do you mean by that?" asked Zerozaki.

"I don't mean anything by it. Well, you see, a classmate of mine from college got murdered."

"Murdered? A classmate?"

"That's what I said. Yeah, at first, I wondered if it was you, but it doesn't match your style. She was strangled with a piece of cloth."

"Ahh. Not my thing."

Please, he added, waving his hand with a grimace.

"I hear you. But I figured one monster would understand another."

"You're mistaken. And it's so you to get that wrong. Monsters don't kill people; people do. And just as people don't understand how monsters feel, monsters don't understand how people feel. It's like comparing a platypus to the archaeopteryx."

I didn't know who was supposed to be the platypus and who the archaeopteryx, but he was probably right. Guys like Zerozaki were singular and atrocious, and they wouldn't be described as such if there weren't so few of them.

"Well, tell me. What sort of case is it?" he asked, sounding not particularly interested.

Figuring there was no need to keep it a secret, I brought him up to date based on what I'd heard from Sasaki. I told him about Mikoko, Tomoe, Muimi, and Akiharu and about the birthday party.

At times nodding, at times shaking his head in consternation, and at one point even flashing a look of concern, Zerozaki finally muttered, “Yeah. Okay… I see I see I see. So that’s how it went down. So?”

“What do you mean so?”

“So means so.”

He stared directly into my eyes. I didn’t answer him. Silence reigned for about an hour.

“Okay, I got it,” Zerozaki spoke at last, standing to his feet. “Let’s go.”

“Hm? Where to?”

“Emoto’s place.”

With that casual reply, and as if he was going to hang out at a good friend’s where he was always welcome, he made his exit.

This is kind of going like I expected, I thought vaguely and rose from the sofa too, leaving our half-eaten ramen behind.

5

"But about that Aoii chick," Zerozaki said apathetically as we walked westward down Shijo Street. "Seems pretty obvious that she's got the hots for you."

"What?"

I couldn't help but be surprised by this sudden leap in our discussion.

It was already past midnight, meaning it was now Monday, the sixteenth. Even on Shijo Street, which was a major east-west road, traffic had grown sparse. Occasionally we passed a group of college students (probably going home after drinking), but the sidewalks were otherwise mostly empty.

I realized that the next day I had to go to school. And from first period, no less. What's more, it was my foreign-language class (they always took attendance). It looked to me like this was going to be an all-nighter.

"Uh, what were we talking about again?"

"That Aoii chick," Zerozaki repeated, knitting his brow at me. "From what you're saying, she's got to have a thing for you."

"No way. What could've possibly given you such a dumb idea? It's not like you. I mean, she's already got a boyfriend anyway."

"Or doesn't."

"Oh, right." She may or may not have told me that. "Still, I don't think that's the case. I mean she does seem to be fond of me, but only in the way people find animals adorable. And she probably sees me as an iguana or something in the reptile family. It's like, Oh, how cute."

“An iguana? Then that makes me a chameleon.” Zerozaki guffawed for a while before switching back to his serious tone to say, “For example. She knew your address, right? That’s extremely suspicious right there. Who bothers to find out the address of someone they don’t even have a crush on?”

“She didn’t have to. It was in the class registry.”

“There. Didn’t you tell me you were away on a trip when school started? You missed your…orientation? Whatever you call those classes, you arrived about a week late. You weren’t around when they made the registry, so your address couldn’t be in it.”

“Ah.”

What an oversight. I certainly didn’t remember telling my address to anyone, so there was no way that my antique of an apartment building would be listed in the registry. Not a single person at Rokumeikan University should’ve known where I lived.

“But Mikoko claimed she got it off the address list,” I said. “Was it just a misunderstanding? But misunderstandings like that don’t happen, do they? I guess she lied to me.”

“Well, not so much a lie as an excuse. She probably followed you home one day.”

“If she did, I’d notice.”

“Maybe. At any rate, let’s say she learned your address through fairly illegitimate means. She couldn’t tell you the truth, so she just blurted out something about the registry.”

“Uh huh.”

“Now let’s think about this. Would any girl go that far to learn the address of a random guy? You might not put it past a guy, but this is a girl.”

Zerozaki flashed an unsavory smile.

“Hmph,” I grunted. “You always act like you know what’s going

on.”

“What can I say, it’s who I am.”

“I still think you’re wrong about this. I’m dead certain.”

“I’ll be damned. Why are you so certain?”

“I mean, she acts like she hates me.”

“Huh?” Zerozaki’s facial expression alone made it clear that he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Come on, at least remember the stuff that came out of your own mouth. Didn’t you just say Aoii is fond of you? So what the hell are you squawking about now?”

“Hang on, this isn’t a contradiction. I have sort of a dualistic or Boolean view of the world. Shall I explain? In other words… Take a car running on this road. Say it’s going at twenty-five miles per hour.”

“Fine. You want me to tell you if that’s fast or slow?”

“Yeah. Which do you think?”

“It’s slow, isn’t it? At this time of night it could go faster.”

“Okay, imagine it going at full speed. I don’t know much about the capacities of automobiles, but surely it can travel at one hundred miles per hour at full throttle. Is that fast?”

“Fast works for me.”

“Finally, imagine the car at rest. What now?”

“‘What now?’” Zerozaki spread his arms. “If it’s not moving, it’s neither fast nor slow.”

“But if you had to say?”

“Well, slow, I guess. You can’t call something that’s not moving fast.”

“Right. Now let’s go back to the initial question□is twenty-five

miles per hour fast or slow? Here's how I'd put it: 'It's twenty-five fast and seventy-five slow.'"

"Ahh." Zerozaki gave a convinced nod, the cheek on the tattooed side of his face contorting from a smile. "So from your perspective, what does Aoii think of you?"

"Yeah. In my estimate, she likes me seventy and hates me fifty."

"I see, and it doesn't equal her liking you twenty."

Indeed. Arithmetical operations were a rationalization that couldn't begin to handle human emotions. Worse, the numbers were fluid, changing places or amplifying with relative ease. An observer could only express them as averaged values.

"Okay, so what about you?" asked Zerozaki.

"Huh?"

"You. How much do you like and hate Aoii?"

"I like her zero and hate her zero."

"Whoa…" eked out Zerozaki, pulling back a bit in surprise. "Man, you're brutal."

"Says the serial killer?"

"Cram it, bystander."

I liked her zero and hated her zero.

You might call it indifference.

Sure, what I told him was a little over the top and hyperbolic, but that didn't mean there was no truth to it.

I'm such a cold, dry human being.

So much so, that I could kill a person just by living.

I was as brutal as Zerozaki made me out to be.

But it was notional, not emotional.

I simply wasn't active about harboring feelings for a stranger.

"That's totally…"

"Total."

"A riot," Zerozaki said, laughing.

"Nonsense." I didn't laugh.

"Well, on a less intellectual level, don't you have the hots for anyone?"

"Hmm. I don't really know."

"Though we're talking about you?"

"Because we're talking about me."

"Ah, I get it. After all, you're the passive bystander. You understand others better than you do yourself. It's that thing about how you can't be your own observer. Uhh…what was it again? The uncertainty principle? Quantum mechanics? Doppelgänger's cat?"

"Doppelgänger it isn't."

"Ah, who then? Since it's math, it's gotta be a German…"

Giving voice to this shocking bit of prejudice, Zerozaki pondered the matter for a while but ultimately couldn't seem to recall whose cat it was. Goddammit, he cursed, slapping his left cheek. This seemed to relieve him.

"Okay," he said. "Here's my conclusion: you've got a terrible attitude."

"That's probably correct. But…"

But.

How had I wanted to continue that sentence? Did I intend to utter

someone's name? Naturally, I did. But whose it could've been, I don't know.

"…It's nonsense, in the end."

"Um, is that supposed to be, like, your escape line?"

As if my incredibly delayed response had knocked the wind out of him, Zerozaki slumped his entire upper body. Though not to the same extent as Mikoko, it seemed he was also one for big reactions.

"Then again, I'm kind of like that too… Or rather, I am like that," he admitted.

We arrived at the Nishioji-Shijo intersection. The Hankyu Saiin Station was visible to the south. Of course, the last train had long since left, so even the stationfront area was desolate. We turned north. If we continued up as far as Maruta-machi, we'd arrive at Tomoe's place.

"Maybe we should've hailed a cab," I mused. "We're still only halfway there."

"It's a waste of money. That is to say, I don't have any money. Or were you going to pay?"

"Nope. No student in Kyoto rides in cabs."

"Huh. I'm not a student, so I wouldn't know."

Suddenly a doubt rose in my mind. Picturing Sasaki's stern gaze, I asked the serial killer beside me, "Aren't you wanted? By the Kyoto police?"

"I don't think so. Nobody's ever tried to talk to me, and nobody's ever followed me. I've done my share of following other people, though," he avowed.

It amazed me that someone who stood out so much□though maybe not in Tokyo, he had to be the only one in Kyoto with a tattoo running down half his face□hadn't been arrested. Then again, when I thought about it, whether or not he stood out probably wasn't that

relevant.

“So we’re going to Emoto’s place and all.”

“What about it?”

“Haven’t you already surmised pretty much what happened? I mean, who the killer is and stuff?”

“Surmised…”

I parroted back Zerozaki’s word. Did this state count as having surmised anything?

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I answered, “but the honest truth is that I really don’t know at the moment. I’m not some renowned detective in a mystery novel or TV series…”

Renowned detective. Red contractor.

“…Or anything.”

“Sure,” Zerozaki relented quicker than I expected.

“But the honest truth is that I also don’t think it’s beyond figuring out. She was strangled to death. In a room, with a narrow estimated time of death. The suspects all have alibis. Maybe with just a few more clues…” In fact, I currently had Kunagisa gathering them, and I was on my way to collect that sort of stuff myself.

“Could it have been a random robbery?”

“Well, technically, but the cops didn’t seem to think so.” There was something very unordinary about both Sasaki and Kazuhito. People like them wouldn’t be sent out to deal with a simple burglary-homicide. That was my hunch, at least.

“Huh.” Zerozaki squinted like he was displeased. “But I don’t see why you have to go out of your way to investigate this. I mean, is there any necessity, or some reality?”

“Not especially. Listen, nobody’s making you come along. Why

don’t you go cut up some more people instead?”

“Nah, that’s okay. I’m not in the mood tonight.” He took my jab more seriously than I’d intended. “Besides, I was the one who suggested it.”

In due course, we arrived at Tomoe’s condo.

Apparently the police had already checked out, and it was as hushed as the train station. We made our way through the automatic door and into the main lobby.

Now then□

“Ah, right. You need an autolock card key to get in…”

“What are we gonna do?” asked Zerozaki.

“This.” I walked a step ahead of him and entered a random room number into the intercom.

“Hello?”

“Um, I’m from 302. I’m so sorry to bother you, but I went and left my card in my room. Would you mind opening the door for me?”

“Oh, certainly.”

K-chunk, opened the glass door.

“I appreciate it,” I thanked the literally random stranger, and Zerozaki and I quickly made our way into the building.

“You lie just like that, huh?” remarked my companion.

“It’s who I am.”

We got into the elevator and went up to the sixth floor. As we proceeded down the hall, I produced a pair of thin white gloves from my pocket and slid them onto my hands.

“If I may,” queried Zerozaki, “did you bring them just for this?”

“Yup. This was the plan.”

“Wow,” he marveled, pulling his own gloves out of his vest pocket and switching from the fingerless ones he was wearing. He probably had them with him all the time given his reaction.

We arrived in front of Tomoe’s room. When I tried the knob, the door was locked, as expected.

“How do you propose we clear this one?”

“Actually, I hadn’t thought about it,” I confessed. “Any ideas?”

“Geez…”

Sounding appalled this time, Zerozaki pulled a thin knife that was practically an awl from his vest pocket and jammed it into the keyhole. He rattled it left and right until a click announced that it had lodged. Then he pulled the knife back out, spun it around once in his hand, and closed it back up in his vest.

Turning and pulling the knob, he said, “It was open.”

“How unsafe.”

“Totally. The serial killer could be anywhere.”

We shrugged at each other and entered.

Walking down the hall between the kitchen and bathroom, we passed through the door at the end. The room hadn’t changed much since my Saturday visit. It looked like things had been moved around a bit, but that probably owed to the crime-scene investigation.

And then there was the center of the room.

White strips of tape formed the shape of a person.

“Wow,” Zerozaki let out amusedly. “So they really do this. It’s like something out of a TV show or a manga. Hey, that Emoto girl had about the same build as me.”

“Looks like it.”

Tomoe was pretty small, even for a woman, but Zerozaki was ridiculously petite for a guy. They weren’t exactly the same size but might’ve easily fit each other’s clothing.

“Incidentally, I prefer tall girls,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yup. But tall girls don’t like short guys, do they?”

“But none of your six victims were tall girls.”

“Who goes around killing the girls he’s into, idiot?” he retorted angrily. It looked like I had touched on a difficult subject.

Nevertheless.

My gaze fell back on the tape on the floor. Strangled by someone, Tomoe must have collapsed on the floor here, having breathed her last… But the tape hardly captured the reality of it.

I looked over at Zerozaki to find him immersed in silent prayer. His eyes were closed, and he’d brought his hands together in front of his chest.

“…”

I deliberated for a moment before deciding to do likewise.

Afterward, I began inspecting the area around the tape again.

“Hm.”

There was something on the right hand of the human shape. It was dark so I couldn’t see very well (and we couldn’t just go turning on the light), but I managed to make out a small ring made out of black tape.

It seemed they’d marked the spot during the investigation.

“What’s this? Maybe some item was on the floor here?”

“No, look closer.” Zerozaki crouched down next to me. “Something’s written here.”

“Dammit, I wish we had a little more light.”

“Just wait a little longer. Your eyes’ll adjust soon enough.”

His advice assumed that we were working at our leisure, but right now it was our only option.

In time, my eyes did begin to adjust.

Thin carpet.

On its surface were red letters.

“…x over y?” we both said.

The letter x was written in cursive handwriting. Below it was a diagonal line, then the letter y, again in cursive. It was messy, so you had to struggle to make it out, but it didn’t seem like it could be saying anything else.

“What’s x over y?” asked Zerozaki.

“Beats me.”

“Is it red because it’s written in blood?”

“Nah, seems to be some kind of oil-based ink,” I answered and stood back up.

Strange writing next to the body’s right hand.

Was it a so-called dying message?

“Hey, we don’t actually know that this is the right hand. We can’t tell if the body was faceup or facedown just by looking at this tape.”

“Ah, right. But, Zerozaki, you couldn’t write that if you were faceup. Not that Tomoe was necessarily the one who wrote it.”

“Hm, true. So there’s the possibility that the killer left this. So

what's this 'x over y' bullshit all about? Math? But this isn't an equation. You can't take it any further."

"Maybe whoever wrote it didn't finish."

"If that's the case, we're pretty much at a dead end. I can't even imagine where the formula was headed."

Zerozaki walked over to a wall, plomped down, and leaned against it.

"I'm sleepy," he said with a big yawn. "Figure anything out?"

"A dying message would be a pretty good haul. Let's see…" I scanned the room. There were no signs of a struggle. As far as I could see, nothing was broken or missing. "Yeah, I don't think this was a burglary."

Was it because of a grudge, then? But what could a girl who'd turned twenty only two days ago have done to inspire such hatred?

I continued examining the room as I wondered. Of course, the police must have been thorough, but in order to fill in the gaps in my imagination, viewing the crime scene with my own eyes was a necessity.

For later on.

"You know…" remarked Zerozaki, watching me moving around.

Judging from his attitude, it didn't look like he intended to help me any further. Not that I expected him to. I'm not such an opportunist as to expect anything from a watery surface.

"You seem strangely used to this."

"Well, I've got experience."

"What could a twenty year old have possibly experienced in his life to be so spectacularly broken? I can't even imagine."

"I don't want to hear that from a serial killer, but I'll lay off it. I

guess I just haven't been leading a decent life. Or no, my life has been decent, but I haven't been."

"Huh. Well, I don't like myself very much," he said flatly to my back, "but seeing you, I realize I'm not so bad."

"That's my line. I may be a screw-up, but I'm nothing compared to you. When I look at it that way, it's kind of a relief."

"I wonder."

"I wonder."

"Say… Why do people die?"

"Because you kill them."

"Sure, but aside from that. Umm, what is it again? Apoptosis? Evolution? Genes? Cancer cells? Cell suicide? That kinda stuff, like the limits of our functionality."

"Come to think of it, I heard once that the longest a human can live is somewhere around one hundred ten years, regardless of the era or region."

"Huh."

"The bottom line is organic diversity. In any case, why survive for so long? I don't think there's any point in sticking around for two or three centuries. I've lived for nineteen years and two months, but quite frankly, I've had enough."

"You're bored?"

"No, it's more like I can't take it anymore. I'm still okay for now, but at this rate… Yeah, in a couple of years, my ability to process reality might reach its limit."

"Hah, but isn't that just one of those things? I'm sure you thought the same thing when you were fourteen. Like, 'in another few years I'll have committed suicide.'"

“I did think that. But I didn’t have the balls to go through with it.”

“Chicken.”

“Yeah, well. I always wanted to be a bird.”

“Not a chicken, I bet. They can’t even fly.”

“I’m joking. But I also think no human who’s lived for ten or twenty years and isn’t just some slaphappy nut avoids contemplating death and the divine.”

“The Reaper and God, huh?”

“Yeah. Usually, though, he’s learned about life beforehand. Living is indispensable to thinking about death, so before you can contemplate death, you have to become versed in life. As they tell us all the time, ‘If you want to kill someone, then the target, whoever it is, needs to be alive to begin with.’ No matter how much effort I might exert, I can’t kill John Lennon.”

Nor Tomoe Emoto.

“So, Zerozaki. What does it mean to be alive?”

“Your heart’s still beating?” he jested, no doubt not meaning it.

“Wrong,” I told him. “Showing signs of life and being alive can’t be equated. But that aside, if there was a person who learned about death before learning about life, what kind of human would he grow up to be? Could we even call him a member of the species homo sapiens? Being an organism but thinking upon death, mourning the end without having begun. What would we label such an existence?”

“That would be the Reaper himself. If not, then…” With searching eyes, and as though demurring, Zerozaki pointed a finger at me instead of finishing his sentence. To be sure, there was no need to put it into words.

“Well, so much for spirit,” I summarized. An escape line.

“Um, I know I already asked, but is there some reason you’re going to all this trouble…illegally entering this apartment, but more than that, a passive bystander like you getting hands-on about it…to look into this case?”

“There is,” I answered. I’d meant to say no, but for some reason a confirmation leapt out of my mouth. I’m not sure where my heart was on it.

“Huh… You don’t like or dislike Aoii, right? What other reason is there for you to get off your ass? The other three are no more than little add-ons… Ah, I see.” An idea seemed to come to Zerozaki as he spoke, and he slapped his hands together. “It’s for Tomoe Emoto.”

Tomoe.

A poor girl brutally murdered soon after celebrating her birthday.

That alone wouldn’t have moved me. A starving child on the other side of the world being shot to death left me impassive. An earthquake in some faraway country killing tens of thousands of people didn’t make me feel a thing. A string of murders occurring in the city where I lived was no matter to me. My makeup wasn’t so tolerant as to stomach the contradiction of a guy like me feeling sorrow, compassion, and fury only when an acquaintance died in his immediate vicinity.

However.

There were always exceptions.

“I was hoping I’d get to talk to Tomoe Emoto just a little more,” I said.

“…”

“That’s all, really.”

I see, Zerozaki nodded. “Whatever the case, it’s a riot for sure.”

Indeed, as he pointed out, it was hardly necessary for me to go to

all this trouble, and even if it wasn't downright uncharacteristic, it certainly wasn't my style.

I realized I was being stupid. I just didn't think I was wrong.

Fahh, Zerozaki yawned again.

"If you're bored, you can go." In fact, he'd just get in my way.

But the guy gently shook his head. "It's fine… Besides, how are you planning to lock up without me?"

"Actually, I'm good at locking a door without a key."

"What a useless skill…"

Of course, I was joking.

Zerozaki closed his eyes and began to doze off. It was like watching my own sleeping face, which was a bizarre, alien sensation, but I continued examining Tomoe's room until four in the morning. I didn't come up with anything that would serve as a clue, though.

"Still…"

Maybe it didn't matter. In fact, halfway through, I'd lost my will to search for and turn up anything and spent most of the time staring down at the tape human.

And reminiscing.

About the hours I'd spent here on Saturday night.

Merely loud hours, ridiculous and senseless.

If you'll let me speak like a bit of a romantic, perhaps this was my memorial to Tomoe. Such an interpretation was unbecoming of me, to be sure, but I felt like maybe it didn't suck to be thinking that way□at least for now.

"Okay, let's go."

“Satisfied?”

“Yeah.”

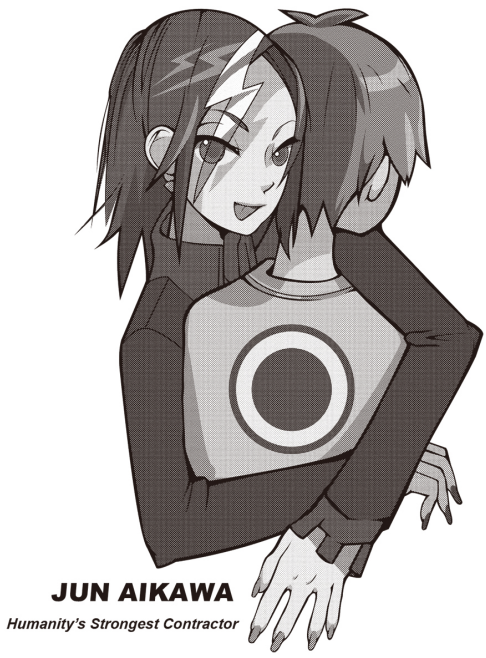
“I see.”

We exited the building, and Zerozaki and I went our separate ways.

There were no parting words.

Nor any plans for our next meeting.

Chapter 4
RED VIOLENCE
—(Stress Through Transgressions)



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There ain’t no meaning.

Got it.

Got it.

Got it.

Got it?

1

Wednesday, May eighteenth.

With second period over, the afternoon break began. I always skipped lunch on days when I had a second-period course since the cafeteria got crowded. I instead made my way directly to my orientation class.

Orientation.

Classmates.

Mikoko Aoii, Muimi Atemiya, Akiharu Usami, and Tomoe Emoto…

I hadn’t seen a single one of those four since Sunday. This was no coincidence; most likely, none of them had come to school. Tomoe

had her reasons, so to speak, but the other three were neither dead nor murdered. Perhaps what happened to Tomoe was to blame for them not showing up, or perhaps it was just how college students behaved after Golden Week.

Things hadn't progressed. The pair of detectives Sasaki and Kazuhito hadn't dropped by my apartment again, I hadn't been contacted by my three classmates, and I was still waiting for news from Kunagisa. I hadn't met with Zerozaki again either, of course.

As someone who doesn't read the paper or watch TV, I naturally had no idea what kind of press (or lack thereof) Tomoe's death had attracted. Nor did I know if the prowler had struck again in the past three days.

I felt no particular desire to know.

I was just waiting.

I was used to waiting.

"Man, it's hot… I wonder if I'm a slug," I muttered as I made my way across campus, from Meigaku Hall to Yoyow Hall. The trek was less than three hundred feet but grueling nonetheless. I had heard of boiling-hot climates before, but I didn't think they really existed. Neither Kobe nor Houston had been this bad. This was the kind of heat and body-soaking humidity unique to basin towns. I struggled to endure it as my legs carried me along. I climbed a staircase, which brought me directly to the second floor of Yoyow Hall, and at last took a moment to catch my breath.

Then.

I spotted somebody familiar.

It wasn't because she was familiar that I noticed her. Rather, my eyes had been attracted to her against their better judgment by her flamboyantly hot-pink jersey. It didn't exactly blend into the surroundings.

That brown sauvage. If she were crouching in front of a convenience store like a delinquent, the image would have been

complete.

Muimi Atemiya.

She was talking to some guy, probably a classmate. Thinking it would be a little obnoxious to butt in, I tried to slip by her unnoticed

“Whoa, Ikkun,” she called out to me.

“Yo,” her male associate greeted me informally. He had light brown hair and an easy-breezy kind of smile. Wait, who was it again? I didn’t know any happy-go-lucky surfer dude, did I? Was he from our orientation class?

“Long time no see,” Muimi said with a thin smile. “Umm… Geez, this is kind of awkward. How have you been since?”

“I’ve been coming to school normally.”

“Oh… Heh, well, I guess you would.” She smiled, but it seemed slightly forced. She appeared worn out, which probably wasn’t forced.

“How about you?” I asked. “What’ve you been doing? I haven’t seen you at school.”

“Uhh, how do you put it…” She couldn’t seem to find the words. I figured that she felt uncomfortable about seeming vulnerable. I’m not that type of person myself, but the sentiment wasn’t beyond my comprehension.

“Well, I’ve got to prepare for a presentation. Time to get outta here. See ya,” the guy said to us and rushed off toward a staircase.

“Energetic son of a bitch,” muttered Muimi, her eyes following him. “He’s totally lazy until an opportunity to be the center of attention comes along. Today’s orientation ought to be a good show. Heheh, I’ll be watching from the front row.”

“Huh. So he’s our classmate after all.”

Muimi froze for a few seconds before stiffly turning her head in my direction like her neck needed an oil change. I almost expected to hear it creaking.

“Don’t tell me you forgot,” she said.

“Hm? Oh, I guess Mikoko didn’t tell you? I’ve got a pretty bad memory, so I don’t really know who’s in our class. I might remember if I heard his name, though.”

Muimi didn’t give it right away. She stared at me in shock for some time before opening her mouth. “That was Akiharu Usami.”

“Oh.”

Yeah.

No wonder she was shocked.

“Does he leave that little of an impression?”

“Well, less than you, anyway. It’s not like he goes around wearing hot pink jerseys”□that was what I wanted to say, but I stopped myself. Muimi had to be the type of person who properly smacked you when you made her mad. And I didn’t think I’d get off with just a punch or two. If I teased her like I did Mikoko, I’d be dead meat.

“It’s my memory that’s at fault here, that’s all,” I replied instead.

“If you really think so, why not do something about it?”

“Well, the weak impression thing may be an issue too. He’s not as crazy as Mikoko. I know a lot of eccentric people. Actually, that makes it sound like I know a lot of people. Correction. The only acquaintances I have are eccentric, so ordinary people just slip through my mind.”

“Ordinary people, huh?” Muimi treated me to a wicked little laugh.

“What? Did I say something funny?”

“No, no, no. But you’re a surprisingly poor judge of character.”

“Huh?”

“Akiharu’s got a meaner personality than you think,” she said in a way that seemed oddly nuanced as she stared off in the direction he had gone moments ago. “Well, you’ll figure that out eventually… Eventually.” Something in her soft tone suggested her words had a deeper meaning, but a moment later her facial expression switched like someone had pressed a button on a remote. She turned my way again. “This is perfect,” she said. “I wanted to have a chat with you. Let’s go talk in the lounge.”

She began walking without waiting for my reply. If we went straight and turned right, we’d arrive at the student lounge. I wondered if it would be crowded since it was the middle of the afternoon, but looking through the window glass I could see that, for some reason, fewer seats were occupied than empty. There was a plate hanging off the door with Do Not Stand written on it in red, Gothic letters. It was a prank a student had carried out several years back—with another character, it would’ve read Do Not Enter—and nobody even bothered questioning it anymore. As a result, nobody bothered getting rid of it, either.

We entered the lounge, and Muimi took a seat. The place was filled with cigarette smoke. Muimi took one whiff and immediately reached into her pocket, but stopped herself just in time. It was nice of her to stick to her policy so fastidiously, but in a place already this filled with smoke, it didn’t really make much difference to me whether she refrained from her habit. But I knew that even if I told her to go ahead, she’d just say, “No, I made a promise to myself,” so I took my seat without a word.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Don’t play dumb. What’s the one thing you and I would have to discuss?”

“Tomoe?”

“Mikoko.” She leaned forward with her arms on the table and glared up at me. I wasn’t so unwary as to relax when I was met with such a gaze. “Have you seen Mikoko since then?”

“Since when?”

“I told you not to play dumb. The police must have also paid you a visit.”

“Sure…” I recalled my meeting with Sasaki and Kazuhito, but to be honest, they weren’t really a pair I wanted to think about too much. “So they visited you as well?” I asked.

“Yeah. Kind of an unpleasant pair.”

“A man and a woman?”

“Yup. The guy looked like he belonged on The X-Files, and the lady looked like she paid regular visits to underground cells. Regular cops piss me off already, so facing those two… Uh, but that’s another story.” She righted her posture. “Yesterday was Tomoe’s funeral.”

Muimi looked at me in an accusatory fashion.

“You didn’t come.”

“Well, nobody told me about it.”

“Mikoko didn’t, either. Akiharu and I went, though.”

“I mean, what can you do? Her death must’ve been a big shock.”

“Must’ve been. You make it sound like it doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

It doesn’t, I stopped myself from saying. Ah, the art of tact.

“You aren’t shocked at all that Tomoe was murdered?” pressed Muimi.

“I was surprised enough when I first heard the news, but after three days, uh, what do they call it? Cleaning out your heart’s drawers? The past is just memories.”

“As Tomoe’s friend, I want to be mad at you, but you’re pretty

much right," Muimi said somewhat self-mockingly. "I guess the human heart is conveniently constructed. Especially for someone who's thick-skinned like me. It's only been three days and I'm already at the point where I can come to school again. But it really was devastating at first. I'd just seen her, and then…"

She snapped her fingers.

And then, silence. A mood that was not so much awkward as painful and unbearable flowed between us.

I said, "Akiharu…seems to have recovered to some degree, based on how he was acting just now."

"Is that how he looked?"

"I thought so."

"If you did, fine."

Again, she seemed to be insinuating something, like when she'd said, Akiharu's got a meaner personality than you think.

What was she getting at?

She changed the subject before I could figure it out. "Apparently you were the last one to hear Tomoe's voice."

"Yeah. Although it was over the phone. Did you hear that from Mikoko? Or from the detectives?"

"Mikoko," she said, nodding. "I went to her place yesterday after the funeral, but… I think she needs more time to recover."

"Ah."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You just heard that Mikoko is feeling down, and I'm asking if that bothers you."

“You sure are hung up on that. I mean, all of you.”

Muimi looked a bit puzzled by the all of you, but she let out a big sigh and stretched. “Fucking clueless…”

“What? I couldn’t quite make that out.”

“Forget it. Listen, maybe I’m being a busybody, and frankly I’m not the type. I was against it at first…”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Okay, let me ask you a favor, then. It’s a simple favor and there’s no catch. Just go visit Mikoko’s place, will ya?”

Muimi pulled a piece of paper out of her jersey pocket and handed it to me. “Mikoko Aoii” was written on it phonetically, and below that were her address and phone number.

“Man, these are some round letters,” I said. “Who wrote this?”

“Me.”

“Ah…”

“What’s up with that expression, like you saw that answer coming?”

“Uh, sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. Hmm…” I looked down at the memo to escape her stare and checked out Mikoko’s address. Horikawa Oike. Come to think of it, had I heard that before? It felt that way, but also like I was finding out for the first time. I couldn’t remember. “It’s pretty far from school. I guess that means she commutes here on her Vespa.”

“Nope, bus. This school doesn’t allow bikes.”

“It doesn’t?”

Incidentally, I commuted on foot. I had a bicycle, but I didn’t use it much. It wasn’t that I particularly liked walking, but somehow it suited me.

“Okay, so I go to Mikoko’s place, and then what?”

“She’s down, so cheer her up. Just the usual stuff like ‘It won’t do you any good to sit around feeling blue’ and ‘Keep your chin up.’ I’m sure that’ll do.”

“The usual… But wouldn’t it be better if it came from you? Oh, but I guess you already told her yesterday. Even her best friend couldn’t cheer her up, so I’m a lost cause…”

“I won’t hold it against you. Just go there, and we’re good. Seriously, that’s all I’m asking. Go see her, say a word or two of encouragement, and then play it by ear.”

Whatever that meant.

But I didn’t really have any reason to refuse, and it was a relatively convenient proposal, so I went ahead and accepted.

“Understood. I’ll try stopping by today after school.”

Just then, the bell indicating the start of third period rang. Yikes, Muimi’s expression said. My face probably didn’t show it, but I felt the same way.

Inokawa-sensei, the Cerberus of Time.

“Ah, crap, that was the bell.”

“Even if we go now, we’ll be marked as absent,” I noted. “In fact, he won’t even let us into the classroom…”

“Bummer. Too bad I’ll be missing out on Akiharu’s studly performance, but let’s cut class.”

She was quick to make a decision. I hesitated for just a moment longer, but no amount of mental effort would turn back the hands of the clock, so I gave up with a sigh.

“What now?” asked Muimi. “Wanna go eat?”

“The cafeteria’s probably still crowded.”

“Oh, right. Well, wanna stay here and chat a little more?”

“Well, then can I ask you something?” I decided to think of this as a good opportunity. “Would anyone have held a grudge against Tomoe?”

Muimi’s face immediately grew serious. It was like she was deliberating, or rather, mentally confirming something that was obvious. After this show of reluctance, she declared, “Nope. To be blunt about it, that girl wasn’t able to incur a grudge.”

“Not able…to incur a grudge? Kind of a weird phrase. Almost sounds like a crappy translation.”

“I think it’s accurate, though… At least, I think so. I’ve only known her since high school, but I’m pretty sure.”

“Speaking of which, how do you all know each other, anyway? You said you’ve been friends with Mikoko since you were little kids.”

“She and I were childhood friends, and then I met Akiharu and Tomoe in high school.”

“Hey, wait. Isn’t that a little strange?”

“What is?”

“Mikoko is nineteen, and her birthday is in April. Tomoe just turned twenty…”

“Oh, okay. Tomoe repeated a grade in junior high.”

“Ah…” So she hadn’t entered college late or returned from abroad. She’d been held back a year. I hadn’t even considered that option.

“She was in the hospital for a long time… She had to take about half a year off, and even after that she tended to be absent a lot. She just didn’t have the attendance record. Apparently she was pretty sick. According to her, she almost died.”

Almost died.

Death.

Being conscious of death.

“Hmph…” I tried my best to sound coolheaded but maybe didn’t pull it off. “I see, so that’s it.”

Tomoe Emoto’s roots.

I nodded several times to myself hoping that Muimi wouldn’t notice.

“So anyway, it’s been the four of us ever since high school,” she said. “It seems that was when Akiharu and Tomoe first met, too.”

“Right. Go on.”

“Uh, okay. So in other words, Tomoe was really good at adapting. Or wait… Maybe that’s not it. If I had to say, maybe she was like you.” Muimi pointed at me, twice. “You’ve heard of personal spaces? Well, she was extremely good at discerning them. She could get close to people to a certain point but never step over that line. She’d never touch your sore spot, and more than that, she never let anyone touch her own. She always maintained a cautious distance, never too near or too far. Kind of like a master swordsman.”

“…”

The term made me think of Miiko for a second.

“Although Tomoe was my friend, I don’t think she ever opened up to me. I also don’t think I was ever any help to her.”

“I doubt that,” I said.

My words couldn’t have meant anything to Muimi. Even I suspected that they didn’t. Whether her hunch was right or not, it probably wasn’t very far from the truth.

But Muimi, you’ve got it wrong. That’s incredibly rude to Tomoe. If you used to be her friend, you shouldn’t say such a thing.

Tomoe and I weren't alike. We were simply on similar tracks. In essence, however, we were different.

The one I'm essentially similar to is the serial killer, Muimi.

"Anyway," she said, "that's how Tomoe was, so she couldn't have incurred even a misplaced grudge. I think I can say that for certain."

"Then who killed her?"

"Like I know. Probably that serial killer."

"The serial killer uses knives. If I'm not mistaken."

"Whatever. Somebody killed her. Those cops looked pretty sharp, so I'm sure they'll find the culprit if we just let it be. There's nothing we can do anyway."

She wore a stern face that didn't match her passive comment. Her own words must not have sat well with her.

Her beloved friend had been murdered, there was nothing she could do, and she felt helpless. But it really was beyond her control. I thought she was being completely honest about having no idea who the killer might be. She had nobody at whom to direct her anger.

Hmm.

"What the hell is everyone doing?" she complained, looking at all the students walking by outside the lounge. "Seriously, what the hell are they doing?"

"Everyone?"

"Everyone. Everybody here. How lame… They're just living. They're not dead, that's all. They're just living."

They're just living, she repeated one more time.

Then she straightened up and said, "Gimme a break. Do they have a purpose? All of them. A purpose for living, a future goal□do they

actually have those?"

"They must. Every person is different. If they don't have any, that ought to be fine too."

"Nah, that's not what I'm talking about. Don't you see? Um… It's not that complicated. Take them, for example."

Muimi pointed at a group of girls on the opposite side of the lounge. They had a sophisticated air about them and were probably sophomores or juniors. I couldn't make out what they were saying, and even if I could, they had to be chattering about something I'd never get, but anyway they were laughing and slapping one another on the shoulder with giddy enjoyment.

"Now let's say I had an assault carbine in my hands. An M4A1. I aim, and… Ratatatatat! What would happen?"

I looked over at them again. Their laughter was just as giddy as before, but in my head, I saw them drenched in blood, their bodies torn apart, pieces blown all the way out the window.

"Well, I suppose they'd die."

"Yeah, they'd probably die. But in that moment, what would they be thinking? Would they have regrets? I don't think they would."

She glared at them with contempt, but none of them noticed. They were fully absorbed in their own chatter, so much so that they didn't even glance in our direction.

"They wouldn't feel a shred of regret. Nothing left undone. After all, they're just living their lives without any goals. What could they possibly leave undone?"

"…"

"Of course, I'm not saying life is dull. It's got its moments. But all these people are desperate□desperate for a way to kill time tomorrow. When they realize what they're thinking, it's all just ways to kill time. 'How will I spend tomorrow? And the next day? How can I kill twenty-four hours?' Like idiots, they desperately

scramble for ways to fill their schedules. But what's the deal? What's the point in that? Tomorrow might as well not come at all, in that case. You need to kill time only because you're living… If you're just living, you might as well die… That's what I think, anyway. Ah, sorry, I guess that was kind of weird."

"No, it was really interesting."

I meant it.

Muimi probably also wondered□

In the end, what about Tomoe?

What passed through Tomoe's mind in the moment of her murder? For Muimi, who'd never been able to step over that line into her friend's heart, this would remain an eternal mystery. But if I were simply to speculate, if I were to speak from my perspective as a bystander, I would bet that she was no different from the giddy girls we were observing: Tomoe died with no regrets.

"The cafeterias must have cleared out a bit by now." Muimi glanced at the clock and stood to her feet. "Let's get some food. If we go to Ryoyu Hall we can probably find a pair of seats."

"Hey, I'm sorry, but would you mind just going alone? I'm not really hungry."

Muimi tilted her head and said, "Oh." She started to take off but came to a halt and looked back at me. "By the way, how do you know Mikoko's birthday is in April and that she's nineteen?"

"She told me."

"Let me rephrase that. Why do you remember? Your memory is crappy. No way you'd remember details like that."

It was a rude question, but she was probably justified in doubting me, considering I had completely forgotten Akiharu's face. "I have my reasons. I won't get into it."

"Oh yeah?" She looked puzzled but didn't pry any further.

“Let me ask one last question too, Muimi. Do you know what x over y is?”

“Hm? Probably means x divided by y, right?”

“Right.”

“How else would you interpret it?”

“No, forget it. Thanks.”

“What’s this about?”

“It was Tomoe’s dying message. I don’t know what it means, either.”

“Huh…” The phrase dying message seemed to make her a bit suspicious, but again, she didn’t pry. After a moment’s thought, she said, “Well, see ya soon. Don’t forget about Mikoko.”

Raising a hand, she left the lounge.

I waved goodbye to her.

From there, I stayed in the lounge for a while, not thinking anything in particular, spaced out. Soon enough my throat started to hurt from all the cigarette smoke, so I made my way outside. When I put my hand into my pocket, I felt a piece of paper. I pulled it out to see that it was the memo with Mikoko’s address that Muimi had given me.

“Guess I don’t have a choice…”

Maybe I needed to see this as another good opportunity.

Fortunately, the class after orientation was a lecture where they didn’t take attendance. I vacillated for approximately three seconds before settling on a self-declared holiday.

When I die, not only would I not have regrets.

I would be relieved.

Thinking so

I passed by several people who were just living and exited the lounge.

2

Mikoko's apartment building in Horikawa Oike was even more lavish and splendid than Tomoe's. It was far too ritzy for a mere college student; it had an almost sublime air about it.

"Now then…"

The bus deposited me in front of the building at a little past two o'clock. The time right now, however, was three thirty. So, looking at the facts objectively and rationally, this meant I'd spent an awkward hour and a half just standing by the entrance.

"What was he doing all that time? Why, he was shaking in his boots at the idea of visiting a girl his age in her apartment where she lived alone."

I provided my own commentary, out loud, in order to assess the situation, but it was useless. It made me feel kind of stupid, in fact. But come to think of it, this was possibly the first occasion I'd decided on a course of action and yet hesitated to carry it out for what you'd legitimately call a long time. If it were a close friend, I wouldn't have given it such lengthy consideration, but I'd only known Mikoko for a few days (actually since last month). It didn't bother me, but I didn't want to annoy her.

That is to say.

As a basically passive human being, I suck at taking the initiative.

"Man, this is pathetic…"

An hour and a half was a bit much, even for me. Starting to feel fed up, I made up my mind and stepped inside the building at last.

Unlike Tomoe's condo, there was no autolock and thus no need for a card key, but there were security cameras watching over the

lobby. Much more effective than an autolock, which is pretty easy to get past. Of course, the most effective method was what they had in Kunagisa's monster of an apartment building: real live security guards.

I looked at Muimi's memo.

Fourth floor, room three.

I boarded the elevator and pressed four. I arrived at the floor moments later and began my way down the narrow hallway. I spotted surveillance cameras on both ends and in front of the elevator. Wasn't their security a bit too tight? Even convenience stores didn't have this many cameras. Was a big celebrity living here in secret? But this was Kyoto. Wait, maybe because it was Kyoto?

My head full of meaningless ruminations, I arrived at the door of room three. Deciding that since I'd made it this far, there was no point in hesitating anymore, I went ahead and pushed the button for the intercom.

Inside, I heard a relatively normal-sounding bell, and then someone moving around. Figuring that, as a girl, she'd take some time getting ready before coming to the door, I prepared myself for the long haul and leaned against the wall behind me.

"Okay, I'm opening up now!"

Wha?

Wow. That was freaking fast. I guess I should've been glad, but somehow it gave me a bad feeling. And my negative premonitions as a passive bystander boasted a hundred-percent accuracy rate.

Uh oh. Some sort of event was about to occur.

"You're seldom this late, Muimi… Did something happen?"

K-chunk.

The lock opened, followed by the door.

“……”

“……”

I failed to respond.

Mikoko couldn’t, either.

It was a dead freeze.

Not even ctrl + alt + del could fix it.

“Ah… ah… ah…ah.”

Mikoko turned red, then pale.

Then back to bright red.

“Ciao,” I greeted, for lack of a better idea.

“Eeeeeeeek!!!!”

Along with that ear-piercing scream, the door slammed shut with such an incredible noise and force that I thought the frame might break. The whole world distorted for a moment, and then came silence, as if nothing had happened.

“……”

Well, if worse came to worst, at least the security cameras could vouch for my innocence in regards to her scream.

“Yeah… Can’t blame her…”

Still wearing her morning face, her hair all messy, her bunny-print pajamas partially unbuttoned, and suddenly confronted by a member of the opposite sex, Mikoko’s reaction wasn’t all that odd.

“Why?!” came a voice from the other side of the door. She sounded like she was barely holding back tears. Or maybe she wasn’t holding them back at all. “Why, why, why, why? What are you doing there? Wasn’t Muimi supposed to be coming over? It’s like, Amateur sleuth Semimaru Asagi instantly solves the case of the locked-room

decapitation murders, but only because the culprit was caught red-handed! Oh, my head! I don't get this! Why?! No way, no way, no way! You're a ghost! This is a lie! A dream! A nightmare!"

Aw, crap, she was panicking.

I wasn't exactly calm, but with her this flustered, I might just be able to keep my wits about me. I see, so Muimi was originally planning to come visit her. Then that lazy punk passed the role over to me and hadn't even told Mikoko about it.

Okay, conditions confirmed.

Proceed with maneuver authorization.

"This is creepy! You shouldn't even know where I live! You're an illusion! This is all some vicious prank!"

"Uhh, I'll explain everything later, so just let me in. No point standing around here like this."

"Go away! Hurry up and go! No wait, I'm sorry, don't go! I'll clean up and get ready, so wait a minute! Please! And forget what you just saw!"

"I've already seen you, so what's the big deal? Just let me in."

"No!"

With that final, sharp rejection, I heard her stomp back into the depths of her apartment. This was followed by what sounded like full-on combat. She was probably cleaning up. She really didn't have to go to the trouble, I thought as I leaned back against the wall again. I waited half an hour before she finally let me in. It was past four o'clock.

The apartment's layout itself wasn't so different from Tomoe's, but there was a ridiculous amount of furniture. It seemed Mikoko was a woman who liked her material possessions. It wasn't a messy place, but you couldn't deny there was a little clutter.

"Wait a sec, okay? I'll pour some tea."

She was wearing a pink camisole and shorts. The outfit exposed far more skin than her pajamas from before so I didn't know what to say. Her hair was also very nicely styled. It was like she'd become a completely different person.

She placed a cup on the low table. Of course it wasn't filled with tap water, but with delicious-looking barley tea. It had a whopping three ice cubes and looked nice and cold.

Mikoko plopped down across from me.

"Um, um… What is it, Ikkun?!" Perhaps still shaken up, she was acting a bit strange. If she'd been walking around Shinkyogoku, the riot police would have stopped her for sure. "So, Muimi should be here any minute! It's already past the time we were supposed to meet, oh my God, where is that girl?!"

"Um, I'm her substitute," I said, waving for her to calm down.

"Wow!" she cried in surprise, then flashed an ambiguous smile that seemed to express anger, embarrassment, and joy all at the same time. "Freaking Muimi…"

"Hey, it's okay. I'm not planning to be here long, so relax. I heard you were feeling depressed, but you seem to be doing fine. I'm glad."

"Oh…"

Reacting to the word depressed, she hung down her head. Perhaps it had been an inconsiderate remark, I thought, but it was just the way I spoke.

Yes. Not only had her friend been murdered, Mikoko was also the first one to see the corpse. Its still, lifeless form burned onto her retinas before anyone else's. And probably remained branded even now. It wasn't something she could just bounce back from.

"You came here because I haven't been going to school and you were worried about me?"

"Mm. Well, more or less."

The facts were a little different, but I supposed the margin of error was negligible.

This time she flashed a straightforward, happy smile.

“Thank you!” she spouted. “I’m so happy! I’m so happy you came, Ikkun!”

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I didn’t even bring anything.” I realized this as I said it. Showing up at someone’s home empty-handed, especially when she might not be feeling well, was probably pretty thoughtless of me. But since I’d come directly from school, I didn’t reckon there was anything I could’ve done.

“Oh, no problem! It’s not like I’m sick or anything. It’s just that… If I go to school, I’ll start thinking about Tomo.”

“It’s not like you don’t think about her when you stay home, right?”

“Well, that’s true… Haha,” Mikoko laughed weakly. “But seeing you has cheered me up. I’m okay. I’ll be going to school again from tomorrow.”

“I’d say don’t worry about school. Have the police been visiting you?”

“Hmm, a few times. A big guy and kind of a scary lady. But I get it! I was the one who found her body, and this is a murder case!”

“Who could’ve killed her?” I said, not so much asking as talking to myself, but still loud enough so that Mikoko could hear.

“I don’t know.” Her muted response was no surprise. “Tomo wasn’t the type of girl to make enemies. That’s for sure.”

“Yeah, that’s what Muimi told me, too. But I wonder… Realistically speaking, is it possible to live without ever being resented or disliked by anybody? I have my doubts about that.”

“Huh?”

“I think it’s worth considering the possibility that you only feel that

way about Tomoe because you two were such good friends, and that in reality, someone out there did resent her. Even if that resentment was unmerited."

Mikoko grew silent, like she couldn't take it. She wore such an expression of pain that I blurted out an apology: "Sorry." She may have been putting on a brave face but perhaps was in no state to be discussing the matter. I mumbled, "I shouldn't have been the one to drop by, after all."

"Huh? Why?" I'd been talking to myself this time, but her face swung up at me. She'd heard. "Ikkun, that isn't true! I'm glad you came!"

"Come on… You're even having to act cheerful for my sake."

Wouldn't a close friend to whom she could speak freely, like Muimi, be much better in this situation? "That's not true," Mikoko persisted, however. "Even if I'm just acting, the more I do, the truer it'll become! I'm fine, I'm really glad you came! Even if you're just doing what Muimi said and hate being here!"

"I don't hate being here… If I hate something, I make it known."

"Really?"

"Nah, I thought I'd try saying it. I'm actually pretty easy to push around."

"I bet," Mikoko agreed smiling.

I let out something like a sigh and stretched my arms. "All joking aside… How are you really feeling? Are you starting to get over the shock?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. It's just…" Her eyes shifted to my right. I followed her gaze to find scattered piles of newspapers and magazines. "Um, do you mind if I talk about when I was in elementary school and stuff?" she prefaced.

"Go for it. I'll listen."

“It was when I was in third grade. The building we were in was undergoing construction, so trucks and bulldozers were constantly coming and going. One day, there was sort of a near miss, and a truck carrying a big load of sand crashed into the first-grade building.”

“Gee, I wouldn’t call something that big a near miss.”

“Yeah. The wall was smashed in, and sand spilled into the classroom, burying some of the first graders. It was a mess. But you know, we were still kids, so to us it was almost like a fun event. Muimi was going wild, surfing on the sand mound and stuff.”

“Ahh…” She did seem like she would’ve been that kind of kid.

“So, then, the next day. I woke up early and went to read the paper. Wouldn’t you be proud to have your school mentioned in a newspaper? Um, if it was thanks to an accident, you shouldn’t be proud of it, but anyway, my school being in the papers made me happy.”

“Well, you were just a kid.”

“But you know what? It wasn’t.” Mikoko heaved an uncharacteristically glum sigh. “To me, it was such a big deal, but on a national level it was nothing. I don’t remember what was on the front page that day, but it felt like someone was telling me, ‘Your existence isn’t worth squat.’ Something so amazing to me didn’t mean a damn thing to others. It was the saddest feeling.”

“…”

“I feel kind of the same way now.”

She pointed to the stacks of newspapers and magazines.

I could see where she was coming from. Sensational cases like the Kyoto prowler were one thing, but the papers wouldn’t dwell for very long on something as ordinary (sorry to say) as the murder of a student living alone in her apartment. It might be in the news the next day, and then maybe the next at best. Even then, it would be a brief article that didn’t take up too many column inches.

I naturally fell silent. She did, too.

The silence lasted for a while, and it was Mikoko who broke it with a question that took things in a confusing new direction. “Ikkun, did you go antiquing with Miss Asano since the other day?”

“Hm?” I blinked. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“O-Oh, I’m sorry! I don’t know where that came from! I didn’t mean to ask that!”

“It’s okay…”

How did she know that I sometimes went antiquing with Miiko? My next-door neighbor wouldn’t have shared such a private detail with my classmate. Come to think of it, I might have promised to go again… Ah, right. I guess Mikoko was already awake.

“Does it bother you, by any chance?” I asked her.

“What what what? Does what bother me?”

I’d promised to go antiquing with Miiko for putting up Mikoko for the night, and I posed the question because she might be feeling bad, but her nervous reaction was not what I expected. There was just no reading this girl.

“Anyway, don’t let it bother you. We do that a lot,” I said.

“You do?!”

“Yeah. Shopping pleases her quite a bit. Did she show you her closet? As cramped as that room is, she won’t stop buying antiques. I guess she sells them after she’s enjoyed them for a while, though. Art isn’t to be monopolized, or something.” In spite of her credo, she didn’t always resell above her buying price, so Miiko wasn’t easy to figure out, either. “Basically I’m there to carry her stuff. Even a guy like me has some basic strength, and I guess she’s not ashamed to ask a neighbor for help. I’m not particularly interested in antiques, but that doesn’t mean I hate them or anything, so if she taps me, I get drafted into it.”

“Huh, I see. So she and you…go out…a lot…and stuff,” Mikoko spoke in fragments for some reason.

“Not a lot, really. Oh, but she’s been in Kyoto for a long time. Been living here alone since she dropped out of high school, according to her. Once, while we were out antiquing, she showed me around some of the temples and shrines. Like Seimei Shrine and the Philosopher’s Walk. Do you know ’em?”

“Yeah. Well, the names, anyway. I’m not really interested in that stuff.”

“Huh? Didn’t you say you knew Kyoto pretty well?”

If she wasn’t interested in the temples and shrines, was she even familiar with this city?

“Oh, uh, well, you know,” she blatantly dodged my question. “Boy, the things you do remember… But anyway! So the two of you must be pretty close!”

She’d touched on this before. Awfully hung up on the whole Miiko subject, wasn’t she? Had something happened between them? I couldn’t imagine what might have in a single night. Why was she trying so hard to bring us together? It made no sense.

“Yeah, well. She’s a pretty interesting person and all,” I remarked. “But we’re not close, per se; she kind of takes care of me. Like sometimes she lends me her car. It’s a Fiat 500, okay, a Fiat 500.”

“Urr… Th-Then maybe it’s fine?” Apparently having no interest in cars whatsoever (she drove a scoot, after all), she let my words pass right through her and started to lose me in turn: “I guess she doesn’t mind you coming to another girl’s room?”

“Huh? Oh. Um, are you telling me to leave?”

“That’s not it! You go out with her, right? In that case… Dammit, Ikkun, you pinhead!” shrieked Mikoko, slamming her hands on the table, her face bright red. Why she was getting so emotional, I had absolutely no idea. All I could do was feel confused. It seemed awfully unreasonable, but it was obvious that my presence was

making her angry.

“I don’t really get it, but I’m sorry,” I apologized for the time being.

“Ahhh,” she moaned. “Fine, let me put it another way. You and she go shopping together.”

“Yeah. Not to run the point into the ground or anything.”

“Does that mean you’d go shopping with me too?”

Her logic was beyond my comprehension, but she wore an earnest look that could only be described as last-ditch desperation. I didn’t dare to respond with a question of my own. “Yeah, I guess I would. No reason not to.”

“Really? For sure?! You aren’t just saying so?” She leaned forward like her life depended on the answer. Biting down on her lip, she looked like a kid who was about to start bawling. Her emotions were way too raw for a college student turning nineteen.

“You sure are hung up on this… Is there a reason?”

“Answer me!”

“Well, probably. I can promise, if you’d like. How about Saturday?”

“Really? You mean it?”

“I don’t lie. As a general rule.”

“You absolutely mean it?”

“If there’s something you want to buy. Also□”

“This is a promise! If you forget, I’ll be pissed!”

“…Okay.”

Overwhelmed, I’d gone and let her pull a promise out of me. But it wasn’t such a terrible thing so I decided to let it slide. This, at last, seemed to calm her down, and she proceeded to gulp down her entire cup of tea.

“Ahh,” she sighed. “I’m so sorry. Sometimes I get a little emotional and don’t even know what I’m saying.”

“Sometimes? Did you just say sometimes?”

“Er, well, all the time.”

She nodded sheepishly.

Hmm.

The shock of Tomoe’s death□certainly Mikoko wasn’t completely over it, but at least she wasn’t so down to be thinking about following after her by committing suicide. She was managing to keep herself together. Some of her antics were perplexing, but that was forgivable. At this rate, she was going to be fine, and mostly recovered by Saturday.

“Well, that’ll do for today,” I said, starting to get up. “I’m afraid I’ve got to go.”

“What what what? Already? Sorry, I did put you in a bad mood!”

“I told you I didn’t plan on staying long when I got here, right? See you soon.”

“U-Um!” Mikoko stopped me as I tried to leave. “Um…um, Ikkun.”

“What?”

“Uhh…” She hesitated a bit, a lot, rather, before she got her thoughts together and spoke. “What do you think Tomo wanted to say that last time?”

So asked Mikoko.

The final phone call.

Tomoe had tried to tell me something.

“I have no idea, really. That day was the first I ever talked to her, so how could I possibly know? I don’t even know why she wanted me.

As for you□Mikoko, I bet you must have some idea.”

“I□” She drooped her head down at my words. “I don’t know. I don’t even have a clue.”

“…”

“Because Tomo was the kind of girl who never said anything.”

She never said anything.

Never opened up. Kept her distance.

“It was like we were friends across an unbreakable sheet of glass. She never said anything important or deep about herself. Not to me.”

“…”

Then what in the world had□

Such a person wanted to tell me?

“Nonsense.”

“Huh? What?”

“I can’t get much of an answer out of you in your current state, so I won’t ask a lot, but Mikoko, will you answer just one question for me?”

“Um…” She wore a puzzled expression. “I guess?”

“What do you think x over y means?”

She thought it over for a moment and answered, “I don’t know.”

Oh, I see. How about that.

I nodded. “Well, see you at school. Sorry I bothered you.”

With that, I left her apartment. I exited the building and began contemplating what to do next.

Horikawa Oike.

Although it was quite a distance to my place, I could still make it home in half an hour on foot. It seemed like a waste of money to take the bus, so I decided to walk.

It never crossed my mind that humanity's strongest contractor might be waiting in my room.

3

Near my apartment building, by Senbondemizu, I ran into Miiko who was out for a stroll, aloof from the world. When she noticed me, she sped up to an unusually fast pace for her and came over to me.

“Yo,” she greeted.

“Hello. On your way to work?”

“Nope. Today I’m going to Mount Hiei.”

“Ahh, with Suzunashi?”

She nodded. Suzunashi, full name Neon Suzunashi, was Miiko’s best friend. She worked part-time at Enryaku Temple on Mt. Hiei in neighboring Shiga Prefecture. Some called her Violence Neon. Others, Blackout Suzunashi. She was sort of a cool lady but prone to flipping out randomly. I occasionally saw her myself, but she’d lecture me about something every time. For someone so young, she was oddly fond of trying to talk some sense into you. It wasn’t her only personality issue, but I liked her more or less, as I did Miiko.

“It sounds like she wants some advice on something, so I’m going out there. I’ll be back by tomorrow, so watch over things back here in the meantime. If someone comes to see me, just get their name and tell them whatever you want. If it’s someone freaky-looking, don’t worry about it.”

“Uhh, sure, no problem.”

“Also, you have a visitor.”

“A visitor? For me?”

“Yup,” Miiko nodded. “When I noticed, she’d broken into your

place. She had a little pizzazz about her…or a ton. I don't know who it is, but her gender appears to be female. She didn't seem to be up to anything in particular, so I just let it be."

Female? What woman was likely to come visit my place? Since I didn't have many acquaintances to begin with, I should've been able to narrow it down with ease, but the way things were going lately…

"Was she about this tall? If so, it was a detective."

"No. That was no detective. Detectives don't look like that," Miiko declared with confidence. "Besides, I've met the one you're talking about. I never forget a vibe I get from someone. Oh yeah, and a car parked by the building looked like it was probably hers. Maybe it'll give you a clue. Well, see ya."

Miiko made her way towards the parking lot. Today's jinbei had Tranquility printed on the back. Yep, she was in a good mood today, possibly because she was going to see Suzunashi.

Still, Suzunashi… What did she want with Miiko anyway? I was curious since Suzunashi was the type of person who rarely called on others for assistance. Just what kind of "advice" was she seeking? She liked sticking her nose in people's problems but usually wasn't proactive about sharing hers.

"Curious…"

But the foremost matter for me now was this "visitor" waiting inside my apartment. If not Sasaki, then who… Muimi or Mikoko? But it was unlikely to be either of them. Meanwhile, Kunagisa, an all-out shut-in, was a physical improbability.

I turned onto Nakadachiuri.

And there□

"Yikes…"

Suddenly everything was clear. As if to say that it was above all traffic laws, a spectacular flaming red Cobra was parked on the

shoulder of the road. Completely out of place on the streets of Kyoto, it was an S-rank machine, a monster.

“Wow… I seriously don’t wanna go home.”

I considered running straight to Kunagisa’s place, in earnest, but based on experience I could imagine the cruel fate in store for me if my escapade became known. Giving up, I dragged my feet to my apartment.

When I climbed up the stairs and arrived at my door, the fact that it was no longer locked didn’t surprise me. Mimicking voices, picking locks, and reading minds came as easily to her as breathing. I opened the door to see the contractor, adorned in a wine-red suit as dark as blood, sitting on the windowsill with her legs crossed as if her presence were the most natural thing in the world.

Preternatural.

Supranatural.

“Hey, Aikawa.”

“Didn’t I tell you not to call me by my last name?”

“Hey, Jun.”

Good, she nodded with a cynical smile.

Jun Aikawa.

Thanks to the case on that island a month ago, I’d met humanity’s strongest contractor. She left me that day with the cool line, “If our fates are linked, we’ll meet again,” only to hang out at my university the next day. She was kind of off like that. She spent the following week making me do her bidding, not even allowing time for sleep, until she finally left Kyoto on account of a job. Judging from that episode, she was a most dangerous character, the antonym of soothing, and not anyone I wanted to get in too deep with.

Objectively, though, if we were to be duly objective, she was an

extremely wild, handsome beauty whose allure was hard to resist but who remained completely unapproachable courtesy of any number of eccentricities.

Studying my face, she said, “You don’t seem that surprised.”

“Oh, I am. You’re back in Kyoto, Jun.”

“For work reasons. We’ll talk about that later… Ah, I get it. Why wouldn’t you expect me after seeing my flashy car parked nearby?”

“No, actually my neighbor warned me.”

“Aw, and I was extra careful not to be noticed. That’s pretty…” Aikawa’s expression grew sharp as a knife for a moment, but only for a moment before reverting to her sardonic smirk. “…Whatever,” she dismissed.

Removing my shoes and stepping into the room, I made my way to the sink. I poured a cup of tap water and served it to Aikawa.

“Enjoy.”

“Muchas gracias,” she said, drinking about half of it before placing the cup on the windowsill.

Geez, she just processed it normally. Before I die, I’d love to stupefy Aikawa.

I asked her, “So what’s going on? Why are you back in Kyoto?”

“I said I’ll tell you later. Instead, allow me to apologize for the period of neglect. You know, you’ve got a nice place. It’s the perfect environment.”

“Are we even seeing the same room?”

“That’s not what I meant. Come on, you get it, don’t you? Well, fine. What’ve you been up to lately, anyway?”

“Nothing. I’m just your average college student. I’m not living some yakuza lifestyle like you.”

“Average college student. Keheh,” chuckled Aikawa.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing in particular. If you weren’t nosing around a murder case involving a classmate or deepening your friendship with a serial killer, nothing’d be funny, Mr. Average College Student.”

“…”

“Ooh, at last, that surprised look. You’ve made me happy.” Aikawa hopped down from the windowsill and sat cross-legged on the floor. Whether or not she felt compelled to precisely because she was wearing a short skirt, I wished she wouldn’t be so provocative.

“How do you know?”

“How do you think I know?”

She grinned with unbridled elation. But having no idea what lurked behind her fun, I was expending copious amounts of energy just confronting and conversing with her. Worse, she was a mind reader of the highest order, so my emotions were leaking out of the pipes. It felt like we were playing poker with only my cards faceup. She sure was a handful and couldn’t be had boiled or grilled.

But if she didn’t want something out of you, she was a nice person…

She was also my type.

I replied, “I’m stumped. Totally stumped. It’s not like I can ever tell what you’re thinking.”

“Think. And think of it… I’m a lone wolf, but I’ve got quite a number of friends, in Kyoto too.”

“Hey, that’s really something. It must be great to have a lot of friends. Even I can acknowledge that. I’ll acknowledge it right now. What friends might you be referring to in this case?”

“For example, Sasaki Sasa.”

“…”

“Or Kazuhito Ikaruga.”

“…”

“Then there’s Tomo Kunagisa.”

Aikawa pulled an envelope from her black bag.

“Here, from your sweet, sweet Tomo.”

“For me?”

“Yep. She said it’s the thingy she promised.”

I accepted the envelope.

Well, how about that.

Aikawa had paid a visit to Shirosaki before coming to my apartment. While I was just your everyday, boring, incapable college student, Tomo Kunagisa was (despite her personality) a computer specialist and expert. She and Aikawa knew each other fairly well.

I thought at Aikawa’s urging. It seemed like she’d returned to Kyoto for a job. Much as I’d done for help in investigating Tomoe’s death, Aikawa had sought out Kunagisa. Then, during the visit, Kunagisa decided to use her as a messenger? No… Something was missing. Kunagisa shouldn’t have had to ask Aikawa, who had no reason, in turn, to agree.

In which case, the worst scenario came to mind, and it wasn’t purely theoretical. To be specific, Aikawa…

“Now hand over your fee,” she commanded. “That is to say, what you know about the Kyoto prowler.”

She wasn’t a messenger, but the collector…

“Jun, you came to Kyoto□”

“Yup. To have a little chat about morals with that psychotic nutjob.”

Aikawa made her living as a contractor. This involved anything and everything. Simply put, she was a jack-of-all-trades and master of all rather than a specialist. Whether it was walking dogs, solving a locked-room murder, or coping with a serial killer with ten disassembled individuals to speak for, as long as there was money involved, she took it on. Granted, not many oddballs out there offered big stacks of cash for walking their dog. At any rate, indifferent to the legality or illegality of it, this red contractor lived out each day taking on what others were unable to.

That said.

“The Kyoto prowler claimed a twelfth victim yesterday,” she noted. “Maybe you don’t realize because you lived overseas for so long, but that number is unprecedented. This kind of case simply doesn’t occur in Japan, much less outside of Tokyo. What’s more, the identity of the killer is a complete mystery. At this point, it’s going to require state intervention.”

“And so you’ve been called upon?”

“Yup,” Aikawa nodded. “Others seem to be on the case□Public Security and troubleshooters□but frankly, I don’t know who. Sadly, I don’t have a lot of horizontal ties. Anyway, my job this time around is to stop the murdering, disassembling maniac from claiming more victims.”

“Did Sasaki hire you?”

“Can’t tell you that. What do you call it again? Confidentiality? Professional ethics? Trade secrets?” Aikawa spread her arms jestingly and laughed. “Still, it seems a lot more worthy of my time than that crazy fiasco on Wet Crow’s Feather Island ever was.”

Worthy of her time. That’s what she had to say about a grisly murderer who’d chopped up twelve people. The idea of taking on an unknown serial killer didn’t frighten her in the least. On the contrary, she was so laidback you’d think she was sashaying on her

way to a picnic.

Suddenly, I realized anew what a menace this crimson contractor was.

And how said menace was encroaching on me presently.

“Now, Kunagisa told me that you know something. Surely you wouldn’t mind sharing it with big sis, whom you adore?” purred Aikawa, ready to pet my face. I didn’t mind the voice, but the speaker was either a tiger or a panther and too much for a tabby like me.

Dammit, Kunagisa.

What happened to complementing each other, blue-haired chick?

Selling me out without the slightest hesitation…

“What’s this?” pressed Aikawa. “Why are you clamming up and looking away? You’re being awfully uncooperative. Don’t tell me you’re not going to tell me. Are you breaking your agreement? You promised, didn’t you, in exchange for what’s in that envelope?”

“No, but, see, I said I’d tell Kunagisa, not just anyone. If I went and told you, it’d be…what’s the word? A betrayal? Immoral? Treacherous? Mutinous? In any case, the bottom line is that it feels like backstabbing, and that’s just not my thing.”

“Haah?” The contractor instantly sounded much scarier. If looks could kill, I’d be dead, and given what was coming maybe I wanted to be. “You can tell Kunagisa, but not me? Uh huh… I had no idea you were such a cold son of a bitch. I see, I see. You make me sad. You’ll listen to Kunagisa, but you won’t obey me because, what, you’re one hell of a tough guy?”

“Oh, um, it’s not like that. You know, with Kunagisa, no matter what you tell her, she’s harmless, while you’re planning on taking some kind of action. Getting myself directly involved is, how do you put it…not my style.”

“Excuse me, I’m harmful?”

“Well, you are.”

As if she were aware of this, instead of arguing the point, she murmured thoughtfully. She was, to a certain degree, someone who respected logic. Once you exceeded that degree, however, it was anyone’s guess… I mean, she just got pissed at you.

“If you told Kunagisa, she’d tell me,” Aikawa pointed out. “That girl has a big mouth. I’m going out of the way here to save you the trouble.”

“Uh, sure, you’re right, but I have my reasons.”

“Hm? Oh, oh oh oh, I get it. Well, why didn’t you say so?” She beckoned to me with a horribly wicked grin and a gentle gesture. Both of her cues were so sensual and enchanting that it gave me goosebumps.

“U-Um, you get what, exactly?”

“Just come to me. I’ll tease you to your heart’s delight.”

When I still didn’t budge, she crawled over to me on all fours and stared up at me with a challenging, or rather provocative, gaze. She nestled her body against mine, wrapped her arms around my back, and forced her weight on me. Pressuring me□

She dug her nails into my back.

“Now. What were you saying?”

“Jun, you’re really scaring me.”

“By the by, my index finger is perilously close to jabbing through your ribs into your liver.”

“□□”

“Don’t tense up so much. It’s bad for you. It’ll make your flesh all stringy. So, just out of curiosity, who do you think is scarier: me or the serial killer?”

As she said this, she ran her tongue down the carotid artery on the right side of my neck. The immediate pleasure from this delicate sensation and a greater fear that she might go ahead and bite off my neck gouged my brain.

Dammit.

The serial killer was preferable indeed.

“Jun, even I’m feeling ready to spurn you.”

“You wanna try? If you do, you’re saying goodbye to getting teased by me.”

“…”

“Either way is fine by me. It doesn’t change the fact that you’re going to talk. I’ve already decided that I’m going to have you tell me about this killer. That’s set. But since you’re a friend, I just thought I’d ask. Do you want me to be gentle? Or do you want it to hurt?”

“Uhh… What’s the difference?”

Our being in an embrace was my saving grace; I didn’t have to see her face, and she couldn’t see mine. Even so, my cold sweat and pounding heart probably betrayed my terror.

“What do you think is the difference?”

Chomp, she bit down on my neck for real. She literally had my life in her clutches. Softly, playfully, she dug her canines into my skin, at the same time working a healthy amount of saliva onto her tongue, licking my flesh between her lips, rubbing her body against mine, running her fingers down my back

“Okay!” I used every ounce of strength to peel her off of me. “I’m not disobeying you anymore! Please forgive me!”

Shoved away by me in effect, Aikawa responded with a sly yet somehow innocent and girlish smile. “Don’t get so serious. It was just a little joke,” she said.

“Yeah, a bad joke. Bad for the heart, anyway…”

“Hahaha. Actually, I’m relieved. You’re a healthy young man.”

“Come on, give me a break.”

I had to calm down. So I chugged down my cup of water. It didn’t take long for my heartbeat to return to normal, but the cold sweating was out of control.

I was no good at dealing with this woman, after all… I should’ve just run straight to Kunagisa’s place without worrying what might happen.

“This is nonsense. Geez…”

Subsequently.

Aikawa managed to fish out of me every last detail about Hitoshiki Zerozaki, no stone left unturned. I tried my best to weasel out of revealing the key facts, but given her mindreading ability, I wasn’t especially successful. Succumbing to her threats and feints every time, coerced, compromised, I just ended up feeling small and aimless.

Zerozaki’s person and character. His appearance, build, and attire at the time. The way he spoke. The circumstances of our first encounter. What we talked about. Even sneaking into Tomoe’s apartment together. Everything that I remembered was drawn out of me.

It wasn’t like Zerozaki and I were friends. We were of the same breed and the far side of the mirror to each other, but I hadn’t promised him anything and he hadn’t asked me not to talk.

Still.

I felt so spineless it was a wonder I didn’t collapse.

“Hmph…” Done milking me, Aikawa dropped her smile, wore a serious look, and sank into thought for some time. “So this guy… Zerozaki? Characters for zero and saki?”

“Yeah. At least, that’s what he calls himself.”

“Hitoshiki Zerozaki… Yikes, what a nasty name.”

Aikawa seemed truly irritated and fed up. It was the first time I’d ever seen that expression on her, so it was a bit refreshing.

“What do you mean? Why is it nasty?”

“Well, well well well… Maybe nasty name isn’t the best way to put it. But ‘Zerozaki’? Sure is an unusual name.”

“Oh, but you know, it might not be his real name. That guy’s no fool. I doubt he would give out his real name to someone he just met.”

“That’s beside the point. Even if it’s an alias, choosing one like ‘Zerozaki’ is proof that he’s a nut. And if it’s his real name, yeah…”

She began thinking again. Once this lady got to thinking, she sank into her own world, and if you were there next to her, you felt invisible. Then again, the Invisible Man still exists, so it was more like turning into air.

“No fool would announce himself, even jokingly, with such a killing name. ‘Zerozaki’? Damn, that’s right above ‘Susukino’ in rank. I guess it’s better than ‘Niounomiya’ or ‘Yamiguchi,’ but you know, I actually hope it’s an alias… In fact, the best-case scenario is that he just happens to have the same last name. But that can’t be it. Something so convenient would never, ever happen in my life. I see, no wonder he’s beyond even Kunagisa and former members of the Team.”

“Uh, is there something wrong with the name Zerozaki?”

“There is. It’s about as terrible as names come. Being told ‘You’re like Zerozaki’ would be the biggest insult for us. That’s how bad ‘Zerozaki’ is. I’d rather not go on explaining why. To be honest, I want so little to do with the ‘Zerozaki Clan’ that even explaining them would be too much for me. Eh, but it’s the name that I don’t like, not the individual himself, so it might not be relevant. Probably just an irregularity… But that aside, is this guy really the

Kyoto prowler?”

“Yes. That’s what he said.”

“So you’re just taking his word for it and didn’t actually witness him in the act?”

“I suppose,” I nodded.

“Hmm. Then he might be some delusional, lying bastard who’s just saying stuff?”

“Yeah, there’s definitely that chance. That wasn’t my impression, though.”

“Really? He’s got a big tattoo on his face, yes? Only on the right half. Even in Chicago he’d be a freak. He’s been standing out like that and eluding the cops without leaving behind a single clue?”

“Yeah, well…”

Naturally, I had considered the possibility myself. But nothing he said refuted his claim, and frankly, I didn’t care.

Where the truth lay made no difference to me.

Perhaps he wasn’t the prowler.

However□

“Without a doubt, he’s a serial killer,” I told Aikawa. “You must know that I haven’t lived the most decent life. In Kobe, Houston, even here. On that island, too, I was almost killed. I may not hold a candle to you, but I’ve seen my fair share of hell in my time.”

And it wasn’t like I was in heaven now.

“I never actually saw him murder anyone, but he did almost kill me. What he wields is just a short knife, and yet I was terrified as if I were dealing with a polearm…no, a light machine gun.”

“Hmm…” Apparently convinced, Aikawa nodded several times. “At

any rate, I guess the bottom line is that a disassembly expert who purports to be a serial slasher is here in Kyoto. Yeah. As long as I have that straight, that's enough."

"It is?"

"Yup. Combined with the other info I've gathered, I have a place to start. Only to start, though. From here on out, it'll be faster if I used my own legs. Without a bit of a challenge, things get boring and I can't function anymore, so par for the course. Anyway, enough of my stuff," she brought the conversation back to me with another nod. "What's going on with you? I heard from both Kunagisa and Sasaki… You're sticking your nose in some tedious, everyday kind of case."

"I got caught up in it."

"You got caught up, and then you kept sticking your nose back in, I bet. You even snuck into the victim's apartment, so quit pretending you're just some bystander."

Touché.

"I dunno…" Aikawa, appalled, stared at me. "You're a hard guy to understand… Don't you have any convictions, or a style? What you say and what you do don't match up at all."

"It's that clash that gives me my flavor."

"As if. Can't you view yourself objectively?"

"Sure I can…"

"You're more teller of the tale than bystander. Well, whatever. Do as you like. It's your life, I guess. Not my place to butt in. Not my problem, as far as that goes."

"How cold."

"Not really. Keep learning, young'un. Do your own dirty work, and if you start something, then finish it. I told you before, didn't I? Being halfassed is the worst. Oh yeah, and also," she said as if she

just remembered, which obviously wasn't the case, "a message from Kunagisa." She pointed to the envelope that I'd put aside.

"What is it?"

"Don't go cheating on me. I'll forgive up to a smooch on the cheek. Iichan, I love youuu, peace peace," Aikawa mimicked Kunagisa's voice and tone, then smiled apologetically. "She said."

"…"

Roger that, I raised my hand.

4

Dinner was an option, timewise, so I invited Aikawa to join me, but eager to proceed with her pursuit of Zerozaki, she left soon afterwards.

It was at the very end that I asked her, “What do you think x over y means?”

“Don’t look to others to confirm what you already know,” she replied flatly.

Indeed.

Watching her back, I sighed.

Hitoshiki Zerozaki.

Jun Aikawa.

She’d probably find him in just a couple of days. I hadn’t exactly provided a cornucopia of information, but it was more than enough to serve her purpose. The exalted Jun Aikawa was on a level beyond my wildest imagination and wrecked even that level. I hardly need to argue the brilliance of her cognitive wiring.

And the two would likely collide. Humanity’s Strongest would collide with the No Longer Human head-on. If it came to that, the outcome was obvious. If Hitoshiki Zerozaki was a homicidal monster, then Jun Aikawa was the ultimate monster hunter. She possessed, in abundance, an absoluteness that snuffed out a mere bit of talent for taking lives. No matter what, you didn’t want to make an enemy of her, not even as your Plan B□the red contractor was that transcendent, that terminal. If there was any silver lining, it was that she could be whimsical, but it was by no means an

opening you could anticipate and act on.

“I wonder if he’ll get away…”

I was a little worried and incredibly sympathetic.

But I didn’t give it too much thought.

What happened in a different world didn’t interest me all that much. Even if it concerned my mirror image.

It was time to think about my own world.

I took in hand the envelope from Kunagisa.

Chapter 5
CALLOUS
—(Black and White)

0

Ilikeyoulikeyouloveyoulots.

1

On Saturday, May twenty-first, I woke up early in the morning.

“Time to get up.”

I had had some kind of nasty dream. It seemed like I was about to be killed, and also like I was trying to kill someone. My entire body was controlled by the sheer will to commit harm, and at the same time, I was being harmed. It was as if I ran and ran and ran and ran and ran only to catch up, horrifyingly, to myself running away. Certain death was just behind me, and yet it was strangely exhilarating. It was that kind of awful dream.

The sheer fact that you couldn’t remember it made it a nightmare, and that it was a nightmare made it a rude awakening.

I rose from my futon and checked the time. Five fifty in the morning. My plans with Mikoko were at ten, so I still had roughly four hours to kill. With nothing particular to do, I folded up my futon and put it away in the closet.

I went outside, thinking it might be nice to go for a run for the first time in a while. I locked up just to be safe, but given the quality, Aikawa wasn’t the only one who could break in handily if so

inclined. Not that there was anything there I'd mind having stolen.

I ran east down Imadegawa Street and turned back once Roshisha University had come into view. I returned straight to my apartment and changed out of my sweaty clothes. Why, oh why did I go jogging in this heat, I regretted as usual.

I picked up the book I'd borrowed from the college library and reread the part I'd stopped in the middle of. I was still left with a good chunk of time, so I reached for the envelope from Kunagisa, the contents of which I'd already glanced over a few times.

"…"

They were internal police documents.

As to how Kunagisa had obtained them, the less I knew, the better. What I did understand, however, was that she could access pretty much any place running on electricity, and that she had an outlaw friend who was privy to the entire Milky Way galaxy. Of course, normally I had little interest in criminal cases. But these were documents on the murder of Tomoe Emoto.

"But come on…"

I flipped through the paper-clipped sheets of A4 paper.

"…"

There wasn't really any new info. They elaborated on some minor details, but most of them seemed irrelevant, and Sasaki had conveyed the general arc. I was a little shattered to realize that I'd been tortured by Aikawa for nothing more.

Still, it wasn't a complete waste.

There were facts I hadn't been aware of that I should have been aware of.

"So here we have alibi relations…"

Naturally, one might say, the four classmates who were with Tomoe

Emoto the night she died (meaning us) were suspects. Nevertheless, all four had alibis, at least for the time being. Miiko next door had vouched for Mikoko and me, while Muimi and Akiharu were vouching for each other. I'd assumed there was a slim possibility that they'd committed the crime in cahoots, but in the police's view, that wasn't the case. Sasaki had made it sound like Muimi and Akiharu had gone to karaoke alone, but some other people from college had been there too. In other words, Akiharu and Muimi had alibis that were as sound as Mikoko's and mine. If anyone had a weak alibi, it was me. After all, Miiko could only vouch for what she heard through the apartment wall.

But of course, I knew I wasn't the killer.

"Okay, so much for this one…"

Next was the list of items in the apartment. When I snuck in with Zerozaki, I didn't think anything was missing, but apparently I was wrong. The document gave a complete list of everything inside Tomoe's apartment, from the largest piece of furniture to the smallest accessory. It was meticulous, like the concept of privacy didn't even exist, and you got the illusion that it represented a full accounting of Tomoe Emoto's personality.

Yet.

One thing was missing from the list□a liquid-capsule neck strap, in other words the birthday present from Akiharu.

I'd seen him give it to her with my own eyes, so it was strange that it wasn't in the room. The most logical explanation to come to mind was that the killer had taken it, but that just raised the question of what the hell for.

"It wasn't exactly worth a lot…"

Meanwhile, the cell phone she'd called me from had been found in her pocket. The conversation record corroborated my claim.

No foreign objects were found in her apartment. Evidently, the killer had left with the thin cloth allegedly used to strangle her.

“Cloth… A piece of cloth… Cloth, huh?”

Next came a thorough description of Mikoko’s discovery of the body, which I hadn’t been able to draw out of her. She’d visited Tomoe’s condo in the morning and buzzed her on the intercom. But there was no answer. She wouldn’t pick up her phone either. Thinking this strange, Mikoko made her way through the autolocked entrance as one of the other residents was leaving and headed to Tomoe’s unit. Her door wasn’t locked. I had feared we might have another damned sealed room on our hands, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“And lastly.”

That inscription x over y.

The police deemed it the work of the perpetrator. No wonder□like Sasaki said, Tomoe Emoto had died instantly, so a dying message didn’t make sense. That was obvious and something I had realized as well. Once again, it neglected to ask why the killer would do such a thing. Why leave your signature at the crime scene unless you were Jack the Ripper?

“And we’re done.”

Those were the facts that could aid me. Overall, though, my ideas on the case remained largely unchanged.

And that was fine, I thought.

A number of minute possibilities had been crossed out. Eliminating even minute ones was my style. At this point, it was safe to say that my solution was beginning to take form.

“Still…”

What the hell was I doing?

Why was I attending to this, anyway?

Was it for Tomoe?

Or Mikoko?

Even obtaining these documents.

Wasting copious amounts of time.

What the hell was I doing?

“I ought to talk to Sasaki again…”

There were some things I wanted to ask. Some minor possibilities left to be narrowed down. Until it was hundred-percent watertight, I wouldn’t call it a solution.

I slid the documents back into the envelope, tore it all to pieces, and tossed it into the garbage bag. In the unlikely event that somebody caught a look at it, there’d be trouble. Besides, having perused the contents fairly intensely, I’d committed most of it to memory.

Now then.

There was still a little over an hour until Mikoko came by.

Two hours, if you factored in her lack of punctuality.

I lay down to progress my thinking a bit more.

About this case?

No.

About my own ridiculousness.

Luckily, there was plenty of time.

I had the rest of my life.

2

Mikoko showed up on time.

“I’m not late today!”

She gave a gleeful German salute with both hands. Maybe some circuit in her was on an odd setting because she was incredibly hyper. Dressed in a tight tank top and large, loose overalls, she also had her head inserted into a yellow hat that looked like it belonged on a kindergartener (not to be mean or anything). There was something adorable about her reddish hair peeking out from under the brim. The tank top was just a bit too small, so it looked like she was wearing overalls directly over nothing, which was, well, how do you say I guess I didn’t mind at all.

“Okay, let’s go...” I started to leave, but she immediately stopped me.

“Oh, wait wait wait.”

Pushing me back into the room, she entered too, uninvited. She’d done this last time as well. Maybe invading homes was one of her hobbies. Not a very sociable one, if you asked me.

“I brought you a little something today. To say thanks for spending the day with me.” No sooner had she spoken than she opened instead of her usual purse a largish Boston bag. She pulled out something like a lunch box that was wrapped in a bandana. When she undid it, it was actually Tupperware.

“Ah. What do we have here?”

“Treats,” she boasted, lifting the lid. Inside were six pieces of sweet potato shaped like Mont Blancs. They were just a little awkward, so I could tell they were handmade.

“Wow, so you bake and stuff.”

“Yup. But don’t expect it to taste too good or anything.”

“I can eat ’em?”

“Of course! Oh, right.” She pulled a thermos out of her bag, handed me the cup, and poured into it. It was black tea, and Marco Polo, no less. So she’d come prepared to compensate for the fact that my room wouldn’t have anything besides water. This girl didn’t let anything get by her.

She poured some for herself as well.

“Well, cheers,” she toasted with a big grin.

I clinked cups with her and popped a piece of sweet potato. An unfathomable sweetness immediately spread inside my mouth. Sure, they weren’t called sweet potatoes for nothing, but I was detecting an extraordinary amount of sugar.

“Pretty sweet,” I voiced my honest impression.

“Yeah! I love sweet stuff!”

“You don’t say.”

I nodded and popped the next one in my mouth. Yup. Sweet. Actually, I hadn’t had breakfast that morning, so this was quite the convenient little surprise. Hmm, but I thought Mikoko told me at one point that she didn’t like sweet stuff. She may or may not have said so. I couldn’t seem to remember.

Well, whatever.

She was a girl. You know how fickle they can be.

Within five minutes, the sweet potatoes had been consumed down to the last crumble.

“So you’re pretty good at cooking, Mikoko.”

“Yep. It’s because I was a latchkey kid.”

“What’s a…latchkey kid?”

“Uhh, it means a kid who’s home alone a lot. Kids whose parents both work have to bring a house key with them to school, right?”

“Why?”

“Um, because if nobody’s home, the door is going to be locked?” she continued, looking rather perplexed. “Err, that’s why they call them latchkey kids…”

“Oh, I get it.”

I broke eye contact with Mikoko, stared up at the ceiling to hide my expression, and nodded.

Well, how about that…

So households like that existed.

“Ikkun, did I say something wrong?”

“Huh? Why?”

“You’re making a really weird face.”

She didn’t sound so much worried as nervous, almost frightened.

“It’s nothing,” I shook my head and denied. Yup, it was nothing at all, a detail that shouldn’t bother anyone. “Let’s go, for real now. Where to, Mikoko?”

“Huh?”

“You wanted to go shopping, right? I think that’s what you said. Shinkyogoku? Kyoto Station? Or do you want to go all the way to Osaka?”

“Oh. Umm. Umm.” She started to get flustered as if she hadn’t even thought about it. Her eyes darted around looking for something or someone to rescue her before finally settling back on me. “A-

Anywhere is fine!”

What was she saying?

“You can’t mean it. You’re the one doing the shopping.”

“How about you, Ikkun? Is there any place in particular you want to go with me?”

“There isn’t really anything I need. You see, living in a room like this, sooner or later I’d have to throw it out. It’d be absurd. Not that I’m against absurdity, but there’s really nothing that I need. What is it you wanted to buy?”

“Uh, well, you know, clothes and stuff.”

“Huh.”

“And I want to eat out.”

“Then I guess Kawara-machi’s the way to go.”

“Okay,” Mikoko agreed.

I was a bit of a pushover, but was she even worse? Why was I deciding where she was going shopping? Bringing that up seemed pointless, though. I said, “Okay, let’s go,” and we left the room together.

Walking for a bit, we reached the Senbon Nakadachiuri stop and waited for a bus to Shijokawara-machi. Within five minutes, a 46 Line arrived. We got on, found a lucky pair of empty seats, and sat down, me by the window and her beside me.

“By the way, Mikoko. You came on your Vespa, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, Vespa. My Vespa,” she replied, looking a bit tense. It seemed my wrath the other day had left a strong impression on her. I wondered if I might have gone too far, but there are times when even I can’t stay calm.

In fact, it happens a lot.

“So you’ll have to come back to get it…”

“It’s okay. As long as I take the bus, the price is the same! It’s a flat fare within city limits!”

“I guess that’s true.”

“So you’re not planning to buy a car or scooter or anything?”

“Nah. Things aren’t particularly inconvenient without one.”

“Huh…” Mikoko nodded ambiguously. “Tomo was the same way. She had a license but didn’t have any wheels. She said she just used it as ID.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“I see! Maybe everyone’s like that. But I want to start driving once I get my license.” Yes, I did seem to remember her saying something about going to driving school and getting her dad to buy her a car once she had a license.

“I drive on occasion. I borrow Miiko’s car.”

“Hunh…”

The instant I brought up Miiko, Mikoko’s expression grew terribly bored. By this point, even I was learning that mentioning my neighbor didn’t serve to enliven a conversation with Mikoko.

“I see,” I said, “so Tomoe had a license too.”

“Yup. For what it’s worth.”

“I see. By the way, did you go to school yesterday or the day before?”

“Yup. Didn’t see you there, for some reason.”

That’s because I skipped classes both days, ma’am.

Having acquired those documents via Kunagisa, I’d had a lot of thinking to do. My role as a college student wasn’t a low priority or

anything, but it didn't rank too high, either.

"I saw Akiharu and Muimi," Mikoko shared with me. "We discussed holding an event in Tomo's honor. You've got to come out when we do it."

For a moment, for just a single instant, I hesitated, but I answered, "Right. Be sure to invite me." I couldn't tell if I was assenting or trying to get out of the spot. Knowing my personality, it was more likely the latter, but in this case, just maybe it was the former.

We got off the bus at Shijokawara-machi.

"O-kay! Today, I get crazy!" trumpeted Mikoko, stretching out both her arms. Then she flashed the most charming, spirited, and liberated smile she'd ever shown me. "Goodbye to the dark stuff! Today we're having fun! Right, Ikkun?!"

"…Yup, you said it."

"Yes! Mikoko, full speed ahead!"

For the next six hours, Mikoko did just as she'd declared, running around Shinkyogoku from one end to the other as if she really had forgotten about Tomoe.

Skipping, hopping around.

Happy as can be.

A happy warrior.

Wild as can be.

A naughty nun.

Almost crazy.

Like she was broken.

Like she was depleted.

Like she was melting.

She danced madly.

She flew about.

She spiraled.

Like she was putting up a struggle.

Like she was putting up resistance.

She spread her wings self-punishingly.

Mistakable, somehow, for a pixie.

Like an innocent child.

Like a girl free of sin.

A wholly pure existence.

Freely expressing her emotions.

Laughing.

Raging.

At times even lamenting with watery eyes.

Yet returning again to that joyful smile.

Even I.

Just some guy who happened to be there.

Me.

The Defective Product□

“…”

Or perhaps she had already made up her mind at that point. It’s a nonsense excuse for me, who couldn’t save her, no, who wouldn’t save her at all, to say so, but I still wonder.

Was Mikoko Aoii already aware of her fate?

“Wow, time just flew by, didn’t it? I can’t believe it,” she marveled.

“Well, it’s like Einstein said. There’s a world of difference between a minute spent with a pretty girl and a minute spent with your hand on a stove,” I remarked as if he were an old friend of mine.

“Huh?” Mikoko wore a look of pure triumph. “Could it be? Are you saying you think I’m pretty?”

“I won’t deny it,” I uttered simply for the sake of the conversation. Giving too direct of a response could result in a needless detour, if there was one thing today had taught me.

I had three paper shopping bags in my right hand, two in my left, and two plastic bags on my back. They were mostly filled with clothes, so none of it was all that heavy, but it sure was a shock to see Mikoko using ten-thousand-yen bills one after another. Kunagisa loved to shop too, but in her case it was all online from home, so someone splurging heavily, with great reality, before my eyes was a fairly new experience for me.

“Okay, then… Should we have something to eat and then go back?” I suggested.

“Yeah! Wowww!”

“What’s the big deal?”

“I’m so happy you asked me!” she said with a big grin.

She was really hyper today….

Why should she be so damn happy?

From there, we went into a place in Kiya-machi that was sort of a cross between a pub and a café. The interior was decorated to look like a correctional facility, with the staff dressed in prisoner or policewoman costumes, but despite the place’s peculiarities, the food and the prices were decent. I’d come here before with Miiko, and we deemed it one of the top three restaurants in town, but I

figured it wouldn't be smart to tell that to Mikoko. Aikawa only ever took me to Japanese bars that served saké, Kunagisa only ate junk food, and pretty much everyone else I knew was finicky. In that sense, someone I could invite to a place like this was valuable.

A policewoman (fake) showed us to our cell, where we sat down.

"Would you care for something to drink?" she asked. Mikoko ordered a cocktail, and I a glass of oolong tea.

"You really don't drink, huh?"

"It's kind of a policy. Like how Muimi doesn't smoke in front of nonsmokers."

"That's right! You know, it was actually Tomo who asked her to stop. Tomo rarely demanded anything from her friends, so even Muimi listened to her."

"True… Muimi doesn't seem like she'd care about annoying others, usually."

"Yeah, but you know, she said she's quitting."

"Huh."

"It'll be good for her health!" exclaimed Mikoko, sweeping away the hint of gloom.

Eventually, the drinks arrived. The waitress served the cocktail to me, and Mikoko the oolong tea. We ignored this for the time being and placed our food orders.

"So you've been friends with Muimi since elementary school," I said.

"Yup. Even then she was a smoker."

"And yet she's pretty tall."

"Yup. I'll bet she'd be even taller if she hadn't smoked."

That defied my imagination.

“You know, she used to be a bully,” Mikoko continued. “She reformed some time during high school.”

“That’s pretty late.”

“She met Tomo, and, well, some things happened. Yadda yadda yadda.”

Some things.

Various things, no doubt.

They had spent enough time together.

“What about you, Mikoko?”

“Hm?”

“You make it sound like Tomoe really had a big influence on Muimi, but what about you? Or Akiharu?”

She fell silent for a moment, then let out a deep sigh. “You know, I always thought human relationships were all about their lengths,” she said. “You spend a long time with a person, and then one day you start to click. That’s what I thought. But I was wrong. I was wrong, Ikkun. There are people you don’t need to know for a long time or to ‘click’ with for you to be attracted to them.”

“Mikoko… Why do you think Tomoe was murdered?”

“Wh-Why? I have no idea.” At my thoughtless question, Mikoko hung her head. “There was no reason for her murder. There wasn’t a single possible reason for killing her.”

“I think the reason people kill one another is actually quite simple,” I said, more or less ignoring her. “Obstacles. If some factor is interfering with your life, the logical step is to try and eliminate it. It’s just like kicking stones off a railway track.”

“But Tomo□”

“Yup, Tomoe made it a point never to overstep people’s boundaries or be invasive. In other words, she couldn’t have become an obstacle to anybody. She was too far out of range to begin with.”

“Yeah.”

“To put it another way, she wasn’t in a position to become the object of somebody’s ill will or enmity or malice. Thus, there was no reason for that somebody to kill her. She wasn’t being a nuisance to anyone.”

ONLY LIVING

YOU’RE A NUISANCE

TO OTHERS

“But it’s not that simple. I mean, Tomoe wasn’t some hermit living in the woods under Mount Fuji. She went to school, was attending a college; she lived a normal student’s life. As such, whether she liked it or not, she had to form relationships. Now let me pose you a question, Mikoko. I want your own opinion. What does it mean to form a personal relationship?”

“Umm…” She seemed a bit befuddled but replied, “Well, I can’t say for sure, but it’s like getting close to somebody, I think.”

“Yes. Right. That’s absolutely right, Mikoko. Now if you were to go and rephrase that, it means choosing somebody. But let’s think about that for a minute. Choosing someone means not choosing somebody else. The act of choosing can only be the direct antonym, the opposite side of the same coin, as not choosing. I’m not talking about crap like how you can only have one best friend or lover. Those are trivial dilemmas. What I’m saying here is something else: a human being liked by everyone, who can be friends with everyone, is a logical impossibility.”

“Hmm… It might be hard□being liked by everyone might be hard□but I don’t think it’s impossible. Maybe not everyone in the world, but I think it’s possible at least with the people around you.”

“I don’t think it is. That’s what I believe. People aren’t all as kind as

you suppose. There are serial killers out there who only view others as objects to be disassembled. There are blue things that can only process society in terms of zeros and ones. Someone who's cynical about the world itself, not to mention people, might be Humanity's Strongest. There are fortune-tellers who've tasted every hope and all despair who go on smirking. There are painters who regard not only others' existence but also their own as mere elements of style. There are people who can only accept good will as ill will."

"…"

"Now, wasn't precisely that understanding why Tomoe chose not to get too involved with people in her life? If you want to have as few enemies as possible, the best way is not to make friends."

"Tomo wasn't…" that kind of girl, Mikoko whispered, and I almost didn't hear her. It seemed she knew herself that such a claim had no basis. "But even if she was, Ikkun. Even if she was, the fact remains that she was murdered."

"You're right. Tomoe made sure never to fall in too deep with anybody, and at the same time, showed superb skill in not letting that show." It was the very thing I was incapable of. No matter how hard I tried. "Nonetheless, she was murdered. Tomoe was murdered. Now, Mikoko, let's take a look at this slasher and disassembler of bodies who's become such a sensation as of late. That guy kills indiscriminately. Happening to catch his sight, or not happening to catch his sight, just bumping into him a bit, or not bumping into him a bit, is enough of a reason for him. He kills mechanically. Automatically. In such a case, even Tomoe is a possible target, and the same goes for me."

"So then…she was killed by the prowler?"

"Apparently not. According to Sasaki□the detective. That's the one thing they seem to know for sure. Okay, changing the subject somewhat… Mikoko, have you ever thought there are too many people?"

Mikoko looked away at my rather abrupt question. I silently waited for her answer, and she said, "That doesn't mean you can kill

people. Ikkun, are you condoning murder?"

"No," I replied without hesitation. "It's not a matter of allowing it or not. It precedes any question of condonement because murder is the absolute worst. That, I can assert. The desire to take a life is the most despicable human emotion. To hope and pray and wish for another person's death is hopelessly evil. It's a sin beyond redemption. I'll be damned if an atrocity beyond apology or atonement could ever be condoned."

My voice was so merciless, I didn't even sound like me.

Total nonsense.

Who was really the hopeless one here?

"Anybody who's taken a life ought to fall and sink into the depths of hell, without exception."

"B-But…" Mikoko gulped in terror at my declaration but managed to muster up an objection. "What if the person was in danger? What if you were walking around Kamogawa Park at night, Ikkun, and this Kyoto prowler came at you with a knife? Would you just let him kill you?"

"No, I'd resist."

"Right?"

"You're right. And I might employ excessive force and accidentally kill him. The same thing goes for me as for everyone else. But I'd also realize something. Taking somebody's life to preserve my own, I'd realize my own sinfulness. I'd come to see I'm guilty merely by living, that I'm a crime to go unforgiven even if I die."

"But, but you were about to be killed, okay? It's only natural for an organism to try to live in that case."

"When you see it as being natural, you've already strayed. Let's make one thing clear. I am capable of murder," I proclaimed.

"…"

“Whether it’s for my sake or someone else’s, I could slaughter another human being. I could eradicate another life whether it’s a friend or family member. Why do you think that is?”

“Well, why? I don’t know,” Mikoko said anxiously. “I don’t think that’s true. You’re a kind guy. I don’t think you could do it.”

“I can. Without a doubt. Because I don’t feel other people’s pain, not one bit.”

“…”

“For example, I have a certain female friend who lacks most of the basic human emotions. She’s always happy, having fun no matter what, but that’s only because she’s a stranger to any other emotion. As a result, she can barely comprehend why other people get sad or angry.”

The only way she could process society. She couldn’t distinguish between paradise and paradise lost.

“I’m the same way. No, I’m much worse,” I confessed. “I can’t understand the pain of others, not even a little. Why? My personality doesn’t let me gauge my own sensations of pain or suffering properly. I feel no antipathy even to the thought of dying. It’s not that I want to die, but my will to resist it is abnormally low. And this leads to what I was saying, Mikoko.”

“…”

“There are a variety of ‘stoppers’ that prevent people from killing one another. One of the most vital ones is feeling, Gee, this guy must be in pain, or Man, I feel sorry for him. Isn’t that right? It is. For example, I’m sure you’ve gotten the urge to hurt somebody. But you probably didn’t punch them or anything.”

“Uh huh. I’ve never punched someone. Not once.”

“I’ll bet you’ve wanted to, though?”

She didn’t answer. This was the clearest confirmation she could’ve given. It was no crime; nobody can go through life without ever

wishing harm, even if you're in heaven.

"I guess basically I'm talking about empathy. That's how you're able to sympathize and pity, and also conform. So it's not always a good thing. Jealousy and envy both have empathy at their root. Minding how others feel. It can be both a merit and a demerit."

If you understood everything that others felt, perhaps all you could do was get broken, like her on that island.

"But let's not wax philosophical about the relative merits here," I said. "The point is that I lack these stoppers. I can't make head or tail of people's feelings. I have to control myself on top of that. Doing so is incredibly agonizing. It's not even funny. But somehow I've managed to keep the demons down."

Harboring such a monster inside you□

You have some nerve to go on living.

"Ikkun…"

"I could reach my limit any day now. And that's why I can't forgive a murderer. How could I? The very existence of a murderer is detestable. Deplorable. I hate all murderers from the bottom of my heart. I hate them heartily. Purely and simply, I'd like to crush them all."

"…"

"Just kidding, I don't think that at all."

Our food arrived. Mikoko ordered more alcohol, and I requested a glass of water.

We sat for a while dining without a word.

"Hey, Ikkun…"

"Yeah?"

"Why are you telling me all this stuff?" she asked as though

puzzled as though to say it had been such a fun day.

I silently shook my head. It was no doubt a terribly cold gesture. “I just figured you might want to hear it. Was I wrong? No, right?”

“…”

“I also wanted you to know the extent to which I’m a defective product.”

“A defective product… That’s such a horrible thing to say. And about yourself, too.”

“It’s because it’s about myself that I can say it. If I’m not a defective product, then, at least, I’m no longer human. Don’t you think? Actually, people tell me that a lot. You’re a basket case, anyone who’s grown even a little close to me has told me. Abnormal. Heretical. Grotesque. Vile. And those are all correct.”

“Ikkun…” Mikoko muttered nervously. “You sound like you’re headed for suicide.”

“I won’t commit suicide. I promised.”

“You…promised?”

“Yeah. To the first person I killed.”

A pause.

I popped a cube of steak in my mouth. “Just kidding,” I said. “Unfortunately, my life isn’t that exciting. And I’m not romantic enough to make such an incredible promise. I’m just an ordinary guy who’s missing some vital component. The actual reason I won’t commit suicide is that, well, it just looks bad. You know, like I’m running from my own flaws. Of course, I am, but I don’t want to look like I am.”

“Ikkun, I know you’re not like other people, but…if you killed yourself, I would cry. I know I would. Forget about being defective or whatever. You’re living a normal life, aren’t you?”

“Broken things can be fixed. Things that are simply inadequate can’t be.”

Mikoko let out a deep sigh. “It’s like I’m talking to Tomo.”

“Hmm? Did she talk about this kind of thing with her?”

“Well, not really. I mean, she didn’t open up to people that much. But if we’d had a real conversation, I’m sure it would’ve been like this.”

“In that case…”

In that case, it was truly regrettable.

I felt all the more like I should have had a serious talk with Tomoe Emoto.

If I had□ / □if I had?

What if I had?

Did I think it would have provided some solace? And who did I think would have been saved?

In the first place.

In the first place, wasn’t it precisely because we had talked that she□

“I’ll bet Tomoe,” I said without looking up, “doesn’t resent the culprit. She must not bear any grudge, not even a little bit.”

“Why do you think so?”

“It’s just a hunch. No other reason. Call it cheap sentiment, but I believe that about Tomoe. I’m sure she’s not the resentful type.” The present tense□I’d made a point of using the present rather than past tense. “Of course, they say she was strangled from behind, so she probably didn’t even see the culprit’s face. I don’t suppose she could resent the killer even if she wanted to.”

“The culprit’s face…” repeated Mikoko. “The person who killed her…”

“But Tomoe probably didn’t care anyway. I mean, the outcome is the same no matter who kills you. In the end, that’s the thing about being murdered. No matter who kills you, the fact that you die doesn’t change. Plus, Tomoe was like me□dying didn’t bother her all that much. I can say this with a fair degree of certainty. She didn’t seem to like herself very much. She told me so that day. She wants to be reborn as you.”

Hearing that, Mikoko looked like she was about to cry. She managed to hold back the tears, but she softly mouthed her friend’s name to herself for some time.

“Tomo… Tomo□Tomo…”

I watched this, unmoved.

Really, truly without feeling anything.

“Mikoko, who do you think did it?”

“You know, you sure do seem hung up on that,” she noted with just a hint of suspicion. “Have you been investigating the case or something?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “Well, not so much investigating, I just want to know. I hope to meet whoever did it. And ask some questions. Or rather, I’d like to interrogate the person□”

“‘Can you justify your own existence?’”

“Ikkun,” Mikoko said awfully sadly, “you’re scary. Really scary.”

“Am I? I personally don’t think so, but maybe I am.”

“You’re able to apply your own rules to others. How should I put it?

It's like you see yourself as just a cog in the world but also think of others as being nothing more than gears. No, not gears. If a gear goes missing, the whole machine breaks down, but you don't care if a person or two disappears."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"I still don't think you're the kind of person who could just kill someone, Ikkun. But you must also be the type who doesn't hesitate to tell someone to drop dead."

"…"

"Aren't I right? I mean, asking the person who killed Tomo a question like that is the same as declaring, 'You don't deserve to live.' It's cruel. It's so cruel. Ikkun, do you realize that?"

"Yes," I shot back, "I'm fully aware of that. I'm so familiar with my sinfulness and nonsensical bent that I could sink into the depths of hell from that alone. Someone once told me that most homicides are the result of going too far or using excessive force, but in my case, I'm capable of premeditated murder. I belong to that rare, low breed that can take a life without any need for self-approval or self-deception or self-denial or self-satisfaction."

"You sure are self-hating."

"I'm a masochist," I admitted. "And an extremely nasty one, at that. But it's my way, my credo, and my style. I have no intention of budging an inch."

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

Mikoko seemed a bit lonely.

As if she were looking at someone in the distance.

Someone who was no longer there.

An ephemeral, poignant gaze.

And expression.

And air.

She never concealed her emotions.

Didn't even try to.

So you could tell.

And understand.

As if.

You were able to tell how another person is feeling.

An illusion.

"But that's…" she said.

It was, for instance

Affection.

A dear presence.

Words of longing.

A truly natural air.

A truly casual mood.

A singular impossibility.

Unaccepting of indifference.

A dazzling dream of a nightmare.

A sense of reality warping and breaking.

Desiring a counterpart. Facing a counterpart.

The pleasure of being beaten down.

The pleasure of being run through.

The ecstasy of being taken apart.

Cut into slimy bits and pieces.

A vital component-robbing.

Heart-grabbing.

Mindfucking.

Smile.

“The Ikkun I love.”

3

Someone who looked like a delinquent was crouched down in front of my apartment building. Wondering who it could be, I approached only to discover, half-expectedly I suppose, that it was Aikawa. Her hairstyle had changed a bit since Wednesday, so she might have gotten it cut. It was a slick one like the kind celebrities sometimes get, where the bangs in front form a perfectly straight line right above the brow. With her already extraordinary proportions, the new look made her even more like a model. If only she hadn't been squatting like some high school thug.

"Yo." Noticing me, she stood up and came ambling my way. She had a rather feline grin on her face. "So how was your date?"

"You were watching us?"

"I spotted you in Shinkyogoku, that's all. I was waiting here to make fun of you."

"I…see."

How much free time did this woman have? I was a little appalled. She was completely unfathomable. There was no way to guess what she might do next. A wily phantom of a woman.

"So you cut your hair. Looking for a change of pace?"

"To be more accurate, I got it cut," she replied, tweaking her bangs.

"Well, yeah, I suppose."

"Yup. Flick, with a survival knife. If I had dodged a second later, I wouldn't have my left eye anymore. I gotta admit, even I was scared."

"…"

She had the worst hairstylist ever.

“I figure I might keep it short for a while. What do you think? Does it work?”

“Aikawa, any hairstyle would look good on you. You’re a beautiful woman.”

“Aw, you’re too sweet. But how many goddamn times do I have to tell you not to call me by my last name?”

She put me in a headlock and noogied my brains out before letting go.

Then she flashed her wicked smile.

You couldn’t hold anything against this woman.

If you did, you’d never get away with it.

“So? How was it?” she persisted. “What’s going on with that younger girl? Hmm? Hmm? Come on, tell big sis. If you’re in trouble I can give you advice.”

“I think you’ve got it all wrong…Jun. She’s just one of the people involved in the case.”

“Hmm? Oh. Really. Then…by any chance was it Mikoko Aoii?”

When I nodded, Aikawa’s face went blank.

“Hmph,” she grunted. “I see. Well, either way, I guess if you’re already back at this hour, you struck out.”

Incidentally, it was eleven o’clock.

Mikoko had imbibed a ridiculous amount of alcohol with all the inevitable consequences. She’d passed out in the middle of the restaurant. I’d hoisted her onto my back and brought her all the way back to Horikawa Oike, entered her apartment, put her to bed, locked up, and taken the bus home. This time she hadn’t looked like she was fake-sleeping.

“Too bad, young’un. Want me to console you?” teased Aikawa, sounding genuinely amused.

“I’m telling you, it’s not like that…and more importantly”□I decided to change the subject before things got worse□“was this hairdresser who did your bangs Zerozaki by any chance?”

“…”

Aikawa’s face instantly contorted.

To express sheer delight.

“Yeah. Hell of a kid, lemme tell you. Still only a second-rate serial killer, but as a knife wielder, he’s as good as they come. He knows, by instinct, exactly how a human has to move which muscles for maximum speed. And take a look at this,” she said, rolling up her right sleeve. Her arm was wrapped in white bandages stained with crimson blood from underneath. “What’s more, he walked away with hardly a scratch. Seriously, that’s one hell of a kid. I guess he’s living up to the Zerozaki name.”

“Is he even tougher than you?”

“It’s not a matter of strong or weak. In terms of our power differential, I’m proud to say I’m several tiers above him. I’ll admit that he is frighteningly quick, the Fastest, but he’s still a hundred years too slow for me.”

Ooh, Aikawa the narcissist, blessed with unrivaled confidence.

“True, I guess he was just focusing on escaping… He was unexpectedly calm. I’d figured a serial killer would be more hot-blooded. Bu-u-ut you were right about him.”

“How do you mean?”

“He’s your spitting image. I can’t put my finger on a specific similarity, but he’s just like you.” Aikawa’s voice was dripping with sarcasm. “The sick masochistic freak and the sick sadistic freak. It’s a match made in freaking heaven.”

“So then,” I said, choosing my words as carefully as I could, “did you, uh, find Zerozaki but let him get away?”

“Hmm?” Grinning creepily, Aikawa pinched both my cheeks. “I’m sorry, did I just hear something come out of this mouth right here? Huh? What was that? Jun Aikawa is just some girl who likes to go around bluffing about herself?”

“No, I would never. First of all, calling you a girl would be pushing□”

Tuggg.

Ahh, who knew the human cheek was so elastic?

“Fine,” Aikawa said, suddenly releasing my face. She scratched the top of her head with a bored expression. “You got it right. I guess I’ve still got some things to learn. I wonder if that tattoo face is still in Kyoto.”

“If I were Zerozaki, I definitely would’ve fled to another prefecture.”

“Yeah…” Aikawa slumped her shoulders. “Dammit, what a hassle. Not that I have any intention of letting him get away.”

Seeing the icy cold look in her eyes, I couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for Zerozaki. Aikawa was damn hard to shake…

“Okay, I’m done bothering you.” She stretched out her back and began to leave. Evidently, she had come on foot today instead of in the Cobra. “Or rather, I’m done trying and failing to bother you. Well, whichever. Good night. Let’s both of us have sweet dreams.”

“Jun. Can I ask you something?” I said to her back. She turned just her head.

“Sure.”

“Would you ever condone murder?”

“Huh? What’s this, some sort of metaphor?”

“Um, well, to be more direct… Do you think it’s okay for one person to kill another?”

“I do,” she answered without pause. “Someone who ought to die can die.” Keheh, she chuckled cynically. “Like let’s say you kill me. Just relax, man. The world goes on,” she continued coolly, then waved a hand and disappeared from view.

“……”

Geez.

If only I could be so defiant, with such a sarcastic stance.

How wonderful it would be.

“I really am…”

Half-assed.

I was tired of myself.

Not just tired, but contemptuous.

“But either way, Aikawa, that’s all nonsense.”

I went inside the apartment building and managed to make it to my door without running into anyone. Reaching into my pocket to get my key, I felt a foreign object. I pulled it out and had a look.

It was Mikoko’s apartment key.

“…”

In order to get her back inside, I’d taken it out of her bag without asking her. I couldn’t just leave the door open, either, so I’d borrowed the key to lock up. At first I considered dropping it through the mail slot, but it was attached to the same ring as her Vespa’s key, so I ended up bringing it home, deciding to return it the next day along with her scooter. Believe me, it wasn’t just because I wanted to ride a Vespa.

“Actually, the Vespa and the key are all I need to deliver…”

I might be daft, clueless, antisocial, and kind of a big jerk, but after going head-to-head like that, I couldn’t ignore her anymore.

Mikoko Aoii.

“I remember now, Mikoko.”

I entered my room and lay down on the floor without even setting out the futon.

It was my first day of college after coming back from that ridiculous island. I didn’t know right from left in regards to Japanese universities, and she was the first one to call out to me.

“Nice to meet you! Is there anything you don’t understand?”

With that beaming smile.

A caring gesture for a classmate who had gotten a late start.

I found it horribly irritating.

And felt just a bit grateful.

Because her bright, innocent aura reminded me a little of a dear friend of mine.

“What a riot,” I said like Hitoshiki Zerozaki, and closed my eyes.

No thinking about tomorrow.

No thinking about the case.

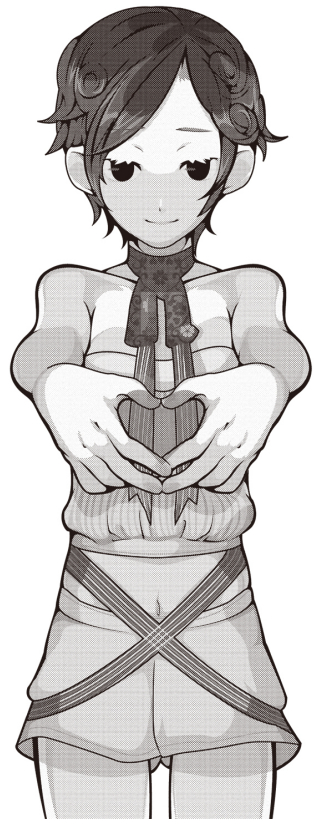
No thinking about the prowler.

No thinking about contractors or my only friend.

I didn’t want to think about anything anymore.

Chapter 6
ABNORMAL ENDING
—(That Wraps It Up)

MIKOKO AOII
Classmate



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I'm begging you, please stop getting my hopes up.

1

"I'll be back tomorrow. Around noon. You'll have your answer then."

That was the note I had left for Mikoko on her tea table. Getting to Horikawa Oike took less than ten minutes by Vespa, so I was in no hurry.

I awoke at eight in the morning. I did a little jogging to kill time, and regretted it. Miiko invited me to breakfast, so I went to her place and was fed. It wasn't so much Japanese-style food but full-blown Buddhist vegetarian cuisine. The flavor left something to be desired, but there was certainly enough of it, so it at least took the edge off my hunger.

"Well, I have to go to work," she said around ten o'clock and left her apartment.

I returned to my own room to kill more time. I tried playing a game of Eight Queens, just as I had done earlier, but my brain didn't seem to be functioning properly, and I gave up by the fifth queen. Next I moved on to the Cannibals and Missionaries problem, but again I got sick of it midway through. If only I owned a computer, I could

pass the time playing video games. Maybe it was time I went and got one from Kunagisa. But then again, it didn't seem like a great idea to decrease the amount of space in my room just to have a way to kill time. Besides, time passes just the same, whether you kill it or not. And like I'd told Mikoko, I didn't particularly dislike being bored and was plenty used to waiting.

"…"

Like any half-smart child, I read The Little Prince at a very young age.

I didn't get it.

"You'll get it when you're a grown-up," people promised.

Recently, I recalled this and tried reading it again.

I still didn't get it.

"Zerozaki's gone from Kyoto… There's no way to contact Aikawa… And Kunagisa's a shut-in."

I really didn't have a single normal acquaintance. True, maybe I never particularly wanted one.

Still, I sometimes wondered. I saw myself as a guy trying to live all alone, but was I rotting away in a cage instead?

"It's hopeless."

In the end, there was no way for me, one character in this great big world, to view my situation with any kind of bird's-eye perspective. Especially when, as Aikawa pointed out, I wasn't the main character or even a supporting character but merely a voice. I was clumsily recounting a section from a tale unfolding with no lien on the world.

That said, by now, facts of this caliber failed to let me wallow in self-loathing.

"Time to get going…"

It was currently eleven o'clock, still way early, but I couldn't be faulted for showing up ahead of time. Thinking so, I left my apartment and proceeded to the parking lot. I started up the Vintage Vespa's engine and put on the helmet. It was a stylish, half-size number Mikoko had left in my room the previous day. There was nothing I could do to make it suit me, but the size was right, so it would at least uphold its role as a helmet.

Go. I rode down Senbondori and turned east on Maruta-machi. I broke east again on Horikawa and sped the Vespa straight ahead from there.

The sweet sensation of slicing through the wind.

I could almost forget that I was alive.

As expected, I reached Oike within ten minutes. I parked and locked the Vespa in the condo's underground lot, exited it, and walked around to the front of the building.

"I wasted over an hour here last time, didn't I…"

It was a pretty embarrassing memory. My brain had a knack for retaining just those. I guess the least I could do was learn from them and not repeat the same mistake.

This time I entered the building without halting. I said hi to a security camera and got on the elevator.

At this point.

At this point, I still hadn't thought of anything.

How to respond to her confession.

What words I could use to answer her affection.

I hadn't thought of anything.

At all.

"Just kidding."

Actually, I'd known for a while.

I only had one thing to say to her.

There was nothing to deliberate over.

Taking the kind of person I was and the kind of girl Mikoko was spat out a result like in a math equation. Of course, reality never conforms to such calculations. It's more like trying to figure out if the last digit in pi is odd or even. Surely it was the epitome of folly for someone like me, ever adrift envisioning a position akin to multiplying the height and dividing by two to yield a triangle's area, to speak of equations and solutions and formulae.

Since I was someone who changed his opinion in the end anyway, what I thought now was irrelevant.

I got off the elevator on the fourth floor and walked down the hall.

Room three.

"…was it?"

My memory was fuzzy, but that sounded right.

I wondered if Mikoko was awake yet. She certainly didn't seem like the low-blood-pressure type, but considering how unpunctual she was, she couldn't be much of an early riser.

I buzzed her intercom.

"…"

No reply.

"Oops."

It wasn't simply that there was no reply through the intercom.

There was no reaction whatsoever.

No noise coming from inside.

Nothing.

“Suspicious…isn’t what this is.”

I pushed the button again.

The same.

I couldn’t sense anyone moving about inside.

Angst. Angst. Angst.

My heart throbbed.

My body was acting up.

“…”

Without speaking a word, I continued pushing the button.

Once, twice, three times, four times.

I quit counting after the fifth time.

I was feeling it.

Not suspicion, but a premonition.

Closer still to precognition.

Like watching a movie whose ending you already knew on endless mode.

Was that how the prophet described it?

The other side of the boob tube where you can’t interfere.

Despite myself, I now understood how she felt.

Mikoko Aoii.

Classmate.

Always cheerful　　sometimes sad

The girl who said

She liked me.

An image.

A tableau I'd misplaced and lost.

A nostalgic vista.

One that had been all too close to me

And hence whose existence I forgot

Needless to recall

An evil

Accursed

Scene.

Death.

Nothingness.

"…, …　　"

Muttering something ruefully□

I opened the door to her room.

Then:

Mikoko Aoii was dead.

2

A brutal sight. A devastating sight.

I stood still right around the center of her room. It was all I could do.

Gross. Gross. Gross.

Gross. Gross. Gross.

Gross gross gross.

GROSS.

I clutched my chest. I was nauseous.

It was like I had accidentally choked down some absolutely indigestible object.

My eyes fell on the bed.

Mikoko was there, lying down.

Sleeping.

Couldn’t you call it sleeping?

Even if her body had ceased to function.

Even if she had no pulse.

Even if hideous fabric marks were etched into her neck.

Even if she was never waking up again.

Even then, there was no other term I cared to use.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Badump. Badump. Gross. I'm dizzy. I'm dizzy. I feel faint. It's spinning, it's spinning. This is crazy crazy crazy crazy.

Or was it me who was crazy?

Then and there□

I thought I might collapse.

My pulse was going wild.

It was hard to breathe.

It was hard to live.

I thought I might die.

My eyes were burning inside.

My heart was freezing inside.

"…"

I gulped to calm myself, but to no avail. Pain. I was in pain. Spinning with pain.

"Mikoko Aoii…" I said as if to convince myself, "has been murdered."

Whump.

I really did collapse, right where I stood, right on my rear end.

I was used to people dying.

I was even used to people close to me dying.

Death was something close to me.

And still, this was painful. It hurt. It hurt too much.

It was excruciating.

Probably, I would never be able to forget this.

Mikoko's "death itself" burning into my retinas the instant I entered the room. I would never be able to forget her lifeless, soulless body.

"…ps."

Somehow I managed to stay conscious.

I shifted my gaze back to Mikoko's form.

She lay face-up on bed, her puffy, violet-hued profile wrenched in agony. Having known what her smile was like made it all the more terrible.

She was no longer dressed in yesterday's overalls. Now she wore a snow-white bare shoulder top with a striking pants skirt, also white but with more of a milky quality. A burial outfit it wasn't.

"…"

Then I remembered.

It was one of the many outfits she'd bought during yesterday's outing.

The last one she bought.

She'd tried it on and asked:

"How do I look?"

Finally tired of giving made-up answers, I'd replied:

"It looks good on you."

It was that outfit.

When I had brought her home the previous evening, naturally I hadn't made her change clothes. I'd just tossed her onto bed with what she was wearing. It meant she must have woken up later on

and changed.

Then, not long afterward…

What was on her mind when she put on the outfit?

And who had she been waiting for?

That already exceeded the power of my imagination.

Plus.

Red letters right by her head.

x/y.

The same formula as the one we'd found in Tomoe's place.

"…Mired in nonsense."

I pulled out my cell phone. I entered a number from memory and pressed call.

She picked up on the first ring.

"Sasa here."

"Hello…"

"Oh, it's you," Sasaki said before I had a chance to give my name. Apparently she remembered people just from their voices. And we had only spoken once. If circumstances hadn't been what they were, I would've been impressed. "What's wrong? Did something come back to you?"

She sounded cool and calm.

This was somehow offensive.

It was objectionable. Objectionable, I say.

"Sasaki, um, well… Aoii…"

“What’s that? I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. Could you please speak up a bit? Aoii?”

“Right. She’s been murdered.”

“……” The air seemed to shift instantly on the other end. “Where are you now?”

“In Aoii’s apartment.”

“We’ll be there soon.”

Click. The line cut off as abruptly as a human life. I stood there with the phone held to my ear. Mikoko remained there in front of me.

“Christ…” I said to her still body.

It was a pointless act. Pointless, and pathetic.

“What was I really planning to tell you?”

Mikoko.

There was no prospect of getting rid of the nasty feeling in the pit of my stomach. Not a chance.

The police arrived in less than ten minutes.

“Are you okay?”

Sasaki held me. I must have looked pretty damn miserable, because she seemed genuinely concerned.

“Are you okay?” she repeated. Unable to provide a verbal answer, I simply raised an arm instead. She saw this and gave a firm nod. “Let’s get you out of here for now. Come on, hurry.”

Leaning on Sasaki’s shoulder, I was taken out to the hallway. Police were filing in one after another from the elevator. Hey, now. No Kazuhito. Had he not come? Maybe he was somewhere else, doing something else. Maybe, maybe not.

“Ugh…” My chest hurts. My chest hurts. My chest hurts.

“Ughhhh…”

Gross. Gross.

Grossly gross.

A discomfort, as if my chest were burning and being destroyed from inside, like something was raging in my guts, traveled through my bloodstreams to my entire body. Hot hot hot hot.

The anguish was maddening.

Sasaki took me out of the building and helped me into the rear seat of her Toyota Crown. She sat in the driver’s seat. “Have you settled down a bit?” she inquired, looking back at me.

I shook my head in silence.

“I see…” She eyed me suspiciously. “I thought you were the kind of person who didn’t mind seeing a dead body. Even if it belonged to a friend.” She dropped her polite speech somewhat. “I guess you’re more sensitive than I thought. You look like you’re dying back there.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll take that as a compli□”

Just as I was about to get out the ment, I felt the urge to vomit and clamped my hand over my mouth. There was no way I could just toss my cookies in Sasaki’s car. Somehow I managed to control my internal organs. Dammit, I couldn’t even mouth off.

“Huh.” Sasaki nodded with a slight look of disappointment. “You’re awfully spineless. I’m surprised Jun is so fond of you.”

……

Ah, come to think of it, hadn’t Aikawa said something about being old friends with Sasaki? Recalling this completely irrelevant detail helped distract me a bit. I sat up from my hunched position and rested my weight against the back of the seat. I breathed in deep.

“Yeah, I’m surprisingly fragile. Actually, I can’t tell if I’m fragile, or

precarious, or fraught…"

"What in the world are you talking about? You're not making a lick of sense."

"Well, please wait until next time… This time is pretty irregular, so decide what kind of human being I am next time. Right now I'm feeling seriously ill."

Gah, I groaned and shut my eyes.

Sasaki paused then said, "Now, we're going to have to question you about the circumstances. That means I've got to take you to the police station. Are you up to it?"

"As long as you drive carefully, I think I'll be all right."

"Okay. I'll try not to make the ride too bumpy."

She faced forward, and the Crown began to roll. Mikoko's condo disappeared from the window view in no time at all. I couldn't make out the speedometer from where I was, but according to the accelerations my body registered, she wasn't driving all that carefully.

"Sasaki, is it okay for you to be away from the crime scene?"

"My job is more about intellectual labor."

"That sounds like, well…" I wanted to say it sounded like we'd get along but thought better of it. No matter how you looked at it, there was no way we'd get along. "Um, Sasaki?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"How do you know Aikawa?"

She was silent for a moment, though it was plenty easy to imagine the look on her face. "Sometimes I go to her for help with work. Right, that's all. Do you ever watch TV detective shows?"

"I know a thing or two about them."

“Okay. You know how the detectives go to informants who operate outside of the law? Well, it’s like that. We have a businesslike relationship.”

It was an awfully crude explanation. Or rather, she didn’t seem to want to explain it at all. The red contractor was a pretty inexplicable woman, so maybe there wasn’t much of a choice.

I said, “No, I wasn’t asking about the particulars, so you can keep it abstract. How do you see her as a person?”

“Do we have to talk about this right now?”

“It might take my mind off things.” I really meant this; if I didn’t get distracted, my stomach was going to burst. “Please. Just talk about something.”

“You pose a difficult question, you know,” she replied after a while. “For example, would you believe a story about taking a point-blank shot to the gut from a sawed-off shotgun and surviving? How about walking around in the midst of a storm of rifle fire with a straight face, or leaping from the fortieth floor of a burning building and escaping unscathed? You wouldn’t believe it, would you? Whenever I talk about Jun, people think I’m lying. So it’s a tough subject to discuss.”

“…”

I understood exactly how she felt, so I didn’t insist.

In another ten minutes, we arrived at the prefectural police headquarters. She took me inside the building.

“Looks like it’s exactly twelve o’clock□lunchtime. Would you like something to eat?” she asked.

“Could I get a katsu-don?” On TV they always offered the guy a bowl of rice topped with pork cutlets.

“I don’t see why not. You’ll be billed for it later, though.”

The government sure was anal. Never mind, I shook my head. If I

tried to eat anything now, it'd just come right back up anyway. That, I could predict with a fair degree of certainty.

"Hmm, well, then go on into that room and wait for me. I just have to make a quick report. I'll be back in two minutes."

She led me to a small conference room and made her way back down the hall alone. Well, at least it wasn't an interrogation room, I noted as I sank into a chair.

I want to smoke, I thought for an instant.

I had never smoked a cigarette in my life.

Was I bored?

Was I trying to escape reality?

Or was I just suicidal?

Any one of those was of equal worth, if you asked me.

Such a futile internal debate…

This was starting to get pretty bad.

One more push, and the existence known as me, this state of being known as myself, was going haywire.

"Sorry for the wait," Sasaki said upon returning. She was carrying some sort of item with a pink wrapper. "Are you okay? You're looking worse by the second. You're even sweating."

"I'm sorry, could you show me where the bathroom is?"

"Down that hall, on the right. It's at the very end, so I don't think you'll miss it."

"Thanks."

Racing out of the room, I clamped a hand over my mouth to endure the nausea.

I found the bathroom right where she said it would be, entered one of the stalls, and vomited everything that had built up in my stomach.

“Ghak… Gffk…”

Unpleasant noises that didn’t sound like they could be coming from myself spilled from my throat. An acid taste remained in my mouth.

I had vomited so profusely I thought my guts might have flipped upside down. I took my time calming my breathing, rose to my feet, and wiped my mouth with a handkerchief.

I flushed the toilet.

Phew…

I made my way over to the sink and washed my face. I scooped some water into my hands and rinsed out my mouth as well. I looked into my own reflection in the mirror. Okay, so I did look like I was at death’s door, but at least I was feeling decidedly better than I had even moments ago.

“...Good.”

Resurrected, I muttered and left the bathroom behind. I made my way back to the room where Sasaki, who looked a little tired of waiting, asked me, “How you feeling?”

“I’m okay. I puked, and now I feel a lot better.”

“I see. Here.” She placed the packaged item in her hand in front of me. “It’s my lunch. Want it?”

“Is it okay?”

“I won’t bill you for it, don’t worry.”

With a shrug, she chose a chair and sat down across from me. I graciously accepted her lunch. It was a fairly generic bento, but my stomach was now empty so it tasted great.

“Okay then,” she said once I was finished. “So what’s going on here?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

Seemingly annoyed by my phrasing, she grew silent and gave me the death stare. I recoiled and averted my gaze.

“Then please give me the facts, in simple terms.”

“Uh, to do that, I’ll have to back up to last night, so it’ll be a little long,” I told her.

“Go right ahead. Until we solve this case, I’ll spend as much time with you as I need to.” She was smiling a little. Her eyes, however, weren’t smiling, which was frightening. I decided to quit with the mouthing off for a while and be straight with her.

“Yesterday, Aoii and I went out. We were in the Shinkyogoku area. Then, well, she drank a little too much.”

“Oh, really… And then?”

Her gaze sharpened as if she were seeking an opening. Surely she wasn’t getting on my case about underage drinking. I realized I couldn’t let my guard down.

“So then I brought her back to her apartment. I went ahead and fished her key out of her bag and put her to bed. Then I took the bus back to my place.” Figuring it wasn’t necessary to report, I skipped the part about running into Aikawa. “After that, I just went to bed like usual.”

“Did you lock up before you left?”

“I did. Her Vespa was still parked in our building’s lot, so I was planning to bring the key and Vespa back together tomor□today. I went to her place on the Vespa today. When I opened the door and went inside, well, things were as you saw them.”

“Hmm…and the door? Was it locked?”

“Huh?” I looked up at her as if the question had taken me by surprise. I made an expression as though I were searching through my memory, for as long as five seconds. “No, it wasn’t locked. I don’t have any recollection of using the key.”

“I see.” She wore a suspicious look but nodded along.

“That place has a lot of security cameras, right? I think they’ll corroborate my story if you check the tapes.”

“No doubt. We’ve already arranged that with the managing firm,” Sasaki remarked coolly. “Now, this is just to make sure, but you didn’t touch anything at the crime scene?”

“No. As pathetic as it sounds, I was just too petrified. I couldn’t even run over to Aoii.”

“Your conduct was quite appropriate.”

With that, she shut her eyes and thought to herself.

So intellectual labor was her main responsibility? That was already more than clear enough from the time she had visited my apartment. I could still taste my defeat.

“I didn’t even touch Aoii’s body, so I don’t know, but was she really dead?”

“Yes. That I can confirm. She had likely been dead for around two to three hours. We’ll have to wait for the autopsy results to pin down the details, but the incident is believed to have occurred between nine and ten a.m.”

“This may be useless to you, but…”

“Go right ahead. Nothing in this world is useless.”

That was a line I might try once myself, but I doubted a guy like me would ever have the chance.

“When I put her to bed last night, Aoii was wearing overalls. But that wasn’t what she had on today. So I think that means she woke

up at some point, either in the morning or in the middle of the night. And I locked the door last night, so maybe Aoii let the killer in herself."

"I see…"

"Just for your information, that outfit she had on today was something she bought yesterday when we were out shopping."

"Ah." Sasaki nodded. I noticed that she wasn't taking notes. Come to think of it, she'd listened to me without jotting anything down during her visit to my apartment.

"You've got a pretty great memory, huh?"

"Sorry? Oh, well, it does the job," she replied as if it was nothing special. But to me it was an extremely enviable trait.

"Also, as it happens, I had breakfast at my next-door neighbor's during that nine o'clock to ten o'clock time frame, so I think I have an alibi."

"Oh, really." Sasaki nodded with an apparent lack of interest as if she had more important things to think about than my damn alibi. "When you called, at first I did think you were the perp."

Her sudden declaration left me momentarily speechless.

"…You're awfully direct. Excuse me if I'm a little surprised."

"Yes, well, you would be. But it's true. The fact is that I did, so I'm not hiding it. I thought you killed her and was pretending to have discovered the body. But you seemed to be feeling genuinely ill, and time of death and such aside, there was no murder weapon, no strip of cloth, at the scene. Which means it would have been physically impossible for you to have done it."

"…"

"That is, of course, unless you're hiding it somewhere in your clothes right now."

“Care to search me?”

“No, that’s fine,” she said, but by no means out of negligence. She’d already performed that task as she helped me out of Mikoko’s room, as she lent me a shoulder to lean on because I was unable to walk on my own.

Kindness□injected with a touch of shrewdness. I didn’t have a problem with that.

“Gee, thanks,” I said.

“I’m sure your innocence will be proven beyond any doubt once an official time of death is established and we take a look at those security tapes. But in that case,” asked Sasaki, looking me directly in the eye, “who do you suppose did it?”

The question I’d posed twice during our first encounter. “Well…I don’t know.”

“Nobody comes to mind at all?”

“Nobody,” I answered promptly. “Aoii and I weren’t all that close to begin with. It was only recently that we started hanging out or having lunch together.”

“Allow me to cut to the chase. Were you and Aoii romantically involved?”

“The answer to that is a no. A no and nothing more. Thinking about it now, I’m not even sure we were friends.”

“Ahh, I see. Jun did say you were like that,” Sasaki muttered, seemingly satisfied.

“Aikawa? She said what about me?”

“That, I can’t share with you.”

The tease of a statement bugged me, but then it occurred to me that this might be part of Sasaki’s strategy, so I cautiously avoided taking the bait. It was easy enough to imagine how Aikawa judged

me anyway.

Sasaki put a few more detailed questions to me and said, “Understood. Now, did you want to ask me anything?”

“No, nothing this time,” I replied after a moment’s thought. “I’d rather just get home and rest as soon as possible.”

“Ah. Then that should be enough for today. Allow me to drive you there.”

Sasaki stood up from her chair and left the room. I followed close behind, and together we exited the building. Getting into her Crown, I sat in the back again. She started the car and accelerated a bit more aggressively than before.

“Nakadachiuri, was it? Off Senbon?”

“Yes.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay. Throwing up was surprisingly refreshing.”

“You know,” she said, steering, her voice stripped of all emotion. “I can’t help but feel like you’re still hiding something.”

“Hiding? Me?”

“That’s what I said.”

“As you can see, I’m just an honest, harmless, and well-behaved young man.”

“Oh, are you?” It was a rare display of sarcasm from Sasaki. “You sure don’t look that way to me, but I guess if you say so yourself, it must be true.”

“You sound like you don’t mean it.”

“Not true. If it sounds that way to you, it’s probably because you’ve got a guilty conscience. I doubt that honest young men go around

breaking into crime scenes illegally."

"Ah."

Open bag, withdraw cat.

Naturally, I had accepted at least a bit of risk from the get-go, but Sasaki had caught me off guard. Since not a word about it was in those documents from Kunagisa, I'd assumed I hadn't been found out, or if I had been, that the matter had fallen by the wayside.

"For the time being, you can relax," she assured without turning around, but as if she saw right through me. "That information hasn't gone beyond me yet."

"You?"

"That's what I said." Her delivery lacked any intonation. And yet there was a meanness to it. Yes, somehow it was very reminiscent of humanity's strongest contractor. "I don't know what possessed you to break into Emoto's room, but I suggest you exercise a bit more discretion. Consider this a piece of advice."

"Not a warning?"

"No, no, just advice."

But there was something very disdainful about her wording. Granted, my actions had been totally rash, and perhaps her attitude was justified.

"Sasaki, I have to ask… Why hasn't that information gone beyond you yet?"

"Who knows? There might be various circumstances. I won't go into detail, but I want you to realize that you owe me one. That's all. Just be sure not to forget it."

"…"

All I could do was sigh. My shoulders slumped, and I felt drained. Seriously, this pattern again? Why were these the only kinds of

people I ever met?

“Everybody I know is extremely smart and has a terrible personality. They all have those same damn traits, so I was hoping to run into someone who’s stupid but nice.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that.” Sasaki clearly wasn’t even cracking a smile. “I, however, have no intention of forfeiting my position.”

Eventually we arrived at the Senbon Nakadachiuri intersection. “Would you like to drop by my apartment?” I invited, but Sasaki declined with an “I’m on duty.” I didn’t find this particularly unfortunate, nor the opposite.

Opening her window, she asked me one last question. “What do you suppose x over y means?”

I paused and said only, “Who knows?” I didn’t think she’d be satisfied with such a reply, but she simply nodded, closed the window, and took off in her car.

I stood there awhile, unmoving, before realizing that there was no point in doing so. I returned to the building, walked down the second-floor hall, and entered my room.

A quiet space. Not a sound, no one there.

A room Mikoko Aoii had visited twice.

The first time, I set out yatsuhashi; the second time, she came with handmade sweet potatoes.

“□□”

I’m not much for sentimentality.

I’m no pessimist, either.

Nor am I a romantic.

Rather, I’m a woefully misguided trivialist.

“I guess I can’t say this was a complete surprise,” I muttered. “I won’t say that. No, I won’t.”

I recalled my conversation with Mikoko from the day before.

A conversation with her, which I’d never be having again.

“It was all nonsense…”

Let us hypothesize as to Mikoko’s feelings towards her killer. She probably wasn’t resentful. Accusing, maybe, but that was it. She was that kind of girl.

There must have been something.

Something I should have said to her.

What was I really supposed to tell her yesterday?

“This is like crying over spilt milk.”

A terribly chilly soliloquy.

This had to be the kind of situation where people cried.

The person over my shoulder thought so.

Night fell.

Miiko visited my room looking concerned.

“Eat this,” she said, thrusting a bowl of rice porridge at me. She wore an innocuous expression, but her eyes were serious. Knowing her gesture had come straight from the heart, I started to feel guilty.

Really. Just how many people was I affecting as I went about my life?

“Thanks a lot.”

I scooped some up with the spoon Miiko provided (there were only

disposable chopsticks in my room) and helped myself to a mouthful. She wasn't an especially good cook, but this porridge was pretty tasty.

"Did something happen?" Miiko didn't ask.

She never asked that type of question. She was just the neighbor who silently and protectively watched over me. A neighbor in the truest sense. This was probably something other than kindness, but she was a kind person all the same.

Come to think of it, hadn't Mikoko given me the same compliment?

That I was kind?

"Mikoko… She died," I said without preamble.

"I see," Miiko nodded. She sounded fairly indifferent. "That night… by which I mean the night the girl stayed in my room. She was strangely grouchy when she woke up in the morning. At first I thought she had a hangover, but that didn't seem to be it."

"…"

"I asked her, 'How do you feel?' The girl answered, 'This is the worst morning of my life.' That's the whole story."

"That's plenty," I said. "Thanks so much, Miiko."

"You really do lead…a difficult life, don't you? The road you walk isn't steep, but it's mercilessly treacherous. Yet you don't go astray. You have my honest admiration."

"I went astray a long time ago. But the path has a strange gravitational pull, and I'm clinging to its bottom side."

"Whatever the case, you're entering a crucial phase." Her voice deepened a bit, almost like she was threatening me. "If you go astray now, it's over. Everything you've built up, all of your perseverance, will go right down the drain. You probably don't care either way, but your life isn't made up of you alone. Don't forget those you're saving just by being alive."

“There are no such people.” Perhaps there was too much self-loathing in my remark. Possibly as a result, Miiko gave me a pitying glance.

“You carry too much of a burden. Don’t think you can really affect people so much. If they turn red when they cross paths with scarlet, they were just weak. If they can exercise some self-discipline, they don’t fall under anyone’s influence. Your existence isn’t such a nuisance to others.”

“Maybe not.”

In the end this was about being too self-conscious. Whether I was alive or not made no difference. Even if a serial killer took my place, the world would go on.

“There are people who like you even so,” Miiko continued. “Those who love you unconditionally exist for certain. The world is that kind of circuit. You may not understand it now, but remember what I say. One day you’ll understand. Stay alive until then, at least.”

Someone who loves me unconditionally. Today, one of them had died.

How many were left?

“I won’t tell you to cheer up. That’s for you to sort out on your own. Just know that the girl’s death wasn’t your fault. I can guarantee you that. I don’t have any basis for my belief, but I feel certain. The dead simply died.”

“But it’s like…I killed her.”

“Did you?”

“Well, no, but if…”

If.

If I hadn’t left her alone in her room, if I hadn’t gone home, or if I had just brought her with me.

Things would have turned out differently.

“That’s what I’m calling taking on too much of a burden. Don’t you, yourself, realize the pointlessness of that line of reasoning?”

“Yes. But Miiko, I still had something left to tell her.”

One last thing.

I hadn’t yet told her that one last thing.

“Regrets you can’t learn from aren’t worth having. That’s all I can say.” My neighbor’s gaze wandered just a bit. “Also, I forgot to apprise you this morning. Suzunashi sends a message. She wanted to make sure I conveyed it.”

“From Suzunashi?”

Miiko nodded. I sat up straight. It wasn’t like Suzunashi was in the room and I knew very well there was no need, but something about her just made me reflexively fix my posture.

Something about Neon Suzunashi.

Miiko opened her mouth. “‘There are two types of people□those who are frightening because you don’t know what they’ll do, and those who are frightening because you do know what they’ll do. But you’re not very frightening at all, so you don’t need to worry about such things.’”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Make sure you do. She said she’ll come visit from Hiei next time, so let’s all go out for lunch. She wants to lecture you.”

“You had me up to the lecture. But I’m definitely okay with lunch. Just…”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, nothing. Thanks for the meal.”

I returned the porridge bowl to her. She took it, said good night, and left my room. The word on the back of her jinbei was Impermanence. It was the second time I had seen this one.

“Seriously,” I mumbled to myself.

What a handful.

Myself, I mean.

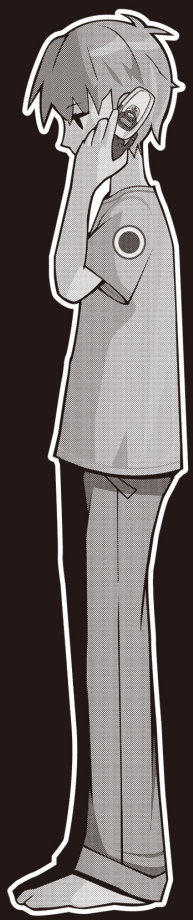
Sure, I deserved to be lectured by Suzunashi all day long.

But.

“But I really don’t want to go to that restaurant again for a while…”

So much for spirit□

I didn’t know when I’d be able to say so this time.



ME (narrator)

Protagonist

Chapter 7

SINK AND DIE

—(Cynicism)

0

Kill every suspect, starting at one end.

The one left standing is your culprit.

1

Three days later, it was Wednesday, May twenty-fifth.

I awoke at ten to noon.

“I guess it’d be cheating to say it’s still morning?”

I rose from bed feeling fairly awful. Lately it had been like this every day. I couldn’t wake up at a normal time at all anymore. You could say my body was rejecting the idea. Naturally, once I had overslept, I couldn’t get into the mood to attend classes, and if I wasn’t in the mood, then I wasn’t going to.

And thus began my fifth straight day of skipping school since last Thursday. If a freshman already doing this in May ended up taking more than four years to graduate, it’d be no surprise. I realized this but wasn’t particularly alarmed. I was paying for my own schooling, after all.

“……”

Since the recent incident, Sasaki had come to visit on both Monday

and Tuesday with Kazuhito in tow. She made a number of detailed inquiries regarding Mikoko's murder, and in exchange for my answers, provided several tidbits of seemingly vital information.

Mikoko's time of death had been narrowed down to between nine thirty and ten o'clock. They had also confirmed that she'd been strangled with a thin cloth and that it was the same piece of cloth used in Tomoe's murder. From this the police judged that the same killer was responsible for both murders.

"What's different from Emoto's case is that Aoii appears to have been strangled from the front."

"From the front?"

"Yes. Emoto was strangled from behind. You can tell by the shape of the marks."

"In other words, Mikoko saw the killer?"

"It's possible," Sasaki said impassively. Whether or not the deceased had seen the killer's face must have not made any difference to her. It was certainly a rational viewpoint.

She also went over the alibis of relevant persons. Muimi was out sightseeing with her younger sister (named Muri, as it were)*. Akiharu didn't have an alibi. I was with Miiko. But all three of us had alibis for Tomoe's case, so none of us were really prime suspects.

"I personally don't agree, but it seems the brass are considering the possibility that these were just robberies gone awry, or possibly some stalker who went too far."

"But then it wouldn't be a serial killing," I seconded Sasaki's take. "It's too strange to be a coincidence, and besides, nothing was even stolen, right? There weren't any signs of sexual assault, either."

"I know. It's just that both of them had too few 'enemies' if it was due to some grudge. It'd be one thing if they were 'public enemies' instead we're having to posit another indiscriminate killer."

Speaking of which, the prowler case had come to a standstill. The number of victims had yet to exceed twelve. In other words, since encountering Aikawa, Zerozaki hadn't claimed any fresh victims. He probably wasn't in Kyoto anymore, just like Aikawa and I had discussed. I wasn't even sure he was still in Japan. Then again, if I made an enemy of Aikawa, I'd flee to the South Pole. Or to outer space, even.

"Still, there's something strange going on," Sasaki said.

"Strange? What?"

"The security cameras. That building has security cameras set up as a crime-prevention measure as you pointed out last time."

"Right."

"Yet they didn't capture a single person who might be the culprit."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. We checked all the tapes from the time Aoii returned home—or rather, when you carried her home—at ten thirty, but the only people on them were other residents of the building and you showing up again around noon."

What did that mean? Was the entire apartment building, in essence, a locked room?

What a joke. It was too unrealistic. But if that was indeed the case, then that was that. "The cameras must have some blind spots, though," I said.

"Yes. We tried it out. It's possible to reach Aoii's room without being captured by the cameras. They swivel like this, you see. But it's nearly impossible without practicing beforehand quite a bit, and even then, your chances of success would be relatively low. Why would a person go to all the trouble?"

"Well, what if they didn't? What if they came in from the veranda or something?"

“Not possible. It’s simply too high and too risky. At any rate…” Sasaki let out an exhausted sigh that didn’t seem very her. “I think this is going to be a hard slog.”

She was probably already in the middle of one.

“A hard slog…”

But no matter how much new information she was willing to divulge, I’d already stopped thinking about these cases. Of course, I wasn’t at such an advanced level of enlightenment that they never crossed my mind anymore, but I’d been at least half-successful at controlling myself.

On the contrary.

On the contrary, I was hoping the truth behind the case would never come to light. I didn’t want to have anything more to do with it, in any form whatsoever.

But that was impossible. Sasaki Sasa was a detective of immeasurable brilliance as was evident from my several conversations with her up to now. No wonder she and Aikawa could be friends. It wouldn’t be long before she uncovered the truth. Maybe she wouldn’t figure out every little detail, but enough for a consistent story.

And thus there was no need for me to do any more thinking. Or to put it plainly, I already saw most of the truth. One more step and I would have the whole picture, and that was a step I didn’t want to take. Nor did I feel much like condemning the culprit.

I had gone as far as breaking into Tomoe’s room and enlisting Kunagisa’s help, and here I was ready to throw in the towel, to leave things as unfinished as a baboon without a butt. But frankly, that’s just who I am. Halfassed all the way, unable to try my best, incapable of passion.

“Okay…” Stretching out my torso, I quickly switched the channel in my head. “Maybe I ought to pay Tomo a visit for a change.”

A complete shut-in, it was guaranteed that she’d be home, and it

wouldn't be a waste of time to head there now. She might be asleep since it was the afternoon, but I didn't care. Maybe I'd give her a stern talking-to for selling me out to Aikawa.

Besides.

Being with her was sure to cheer me up.

With that decision made, I changed clothes and stuck my cell phone into my pocket. I deliberated for a while whether I should borrow Miiko's Fiat, walk, or ride my bike, but ultimately I settled on going on foot. I just felt like it. Of course, that would take a good three hours, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

I left my room, locked up, and exited the building.

It was nice out. It had been muggy lately, but today it was pleasantly dry and crisp. I wished it were always like this, but then, I wasn't sure what I meant by always.

"Huh?"

After walking for a bit, I spotted a familiar figure. My memory failed me, but it was definitely familiar. Who could it be? It felt like we'd met before…

He was dressed in street fashion and had light brown hair like some playboy. He was toting an abnormally large bag that grabbed your attention, but it was a poor match for his clothes.

I've always wondered why street fashion looks so bad on Japanese people. It isn't so much that it doesn't suit us; it's just that it makes us look like poseurs. Different vibes for different countries, I suppose.

That aside, who in the world was it?

Upon noticing me, he ran over to me. "Yo!" he even greeted me casually.

"Hello," I replied, but of course I still couldn't remember him. I knew he was a Rokumeikan University student, but did I know

anyone like him?

“How are you? Maaan, I don’t know this area. The geography. I got totally lost and all.”

“Ahh…yeah,” I improvised. “Sure, those things happen.”

“Start showing up to classes again. That’s why I had to come all the way out here. I mean, you’re shocked about the whole Aoii thing, but you’re gonna end up having to repeat a year. People will call you Double Dragon ’n shit.”

Aoii? Did he just mention Aoii?

Oh, right. Got it.

“Akiharu, right?”

“Whoa. What the hell? Don’t tell me you just figured that out.” Akiharu chortled lightheartedly, but I felt as though he saw right through me, and just the idea had me in a cold sweat.

“You mean you came to see me?”

“You bet that’s what I mean. Just some minor business. Come on, follow me.”

He started walking. His explanation was not very convincing, but I went ahead and followed after him. There I was, just going along with the flow again.

“Where’re we going?”

“Kitanotenman Shrine. It’s parked there.”

“What’s parked there?”

“That’s the surprise,” Akiharu said with a smile that didn’t quite sit right with me. “Man, I knew you were a gloomy guy, but your face right now is like a full-fledged gloomathon.”

“You, on the other hand, seem cheerful.”

“Well, you know. It’s like, there was the Emoto thing, right? It’s like that toughened me up. I was barely over the shock. Life sure loves to just peace out on ya, huh?”

He sounded flippant, but I also got the feeling that he was dissimulating. About what? I pondered this for a moment but came up empty-handed.

“Akiharu, don’t you have orientation class now? Should you really be here messing around?”

“Ah, whatever. I don’t care about school anymore.” He laughed like he meant that. “I just want to get this favor out of the way so I can relax again. I don’t want it to be on my mind when I die, y’know? Besides, I hate Inosen, so I’m not a big fan of orientation.”

Inosen was short for Inokawa-sensei, by the way. “Really? I think he’s a pretty good guy.”

“Well, I think there’s a difference between good and self-righteous. It’s not just the time thing, either. That guy’s always trying to force his beliefs on others, am I right? It’s that kind of thing, man. I don’t like it. I mean, I guess he’s not a hypocrite or anything…but yeah.”

“Uh huh.”

“Besides, I’m not gonna lose any credits just for skipping class a couple times. Our college is easy-peasy, man. They say it’s famous for letting you pass classes blindfolded. Number two in all of Kansai.”

Where the hell is number one? I started to ask but cut myself off. Some things were best left unsaid.

We arrived at Kitanotenman Shrine within five minutes. Despite being a national treasure, something about its proximity to home made it hard to appreciate, and this was actually the first time I had ever set foot on the premises.

“This way, this way,” Akiharu said, bringing me to the parking lot. “Here ya go.”

He pointed proudly to a white Vespa. It was a vintage model. I glanced at the plate and saw that this was, in fact, the very same Vespa belonging to Mikoko that I'd ridden to her house that day.

"…"

"Oh yeah, and this." He handed me the key as I stood there, flabbergasted. Pulling the helmet out of his bag, he gave that to me as well. I'd thought it was a suspiciously large bag, but who would've guessed there was a helmet inside?

"Akiharu, this…"

"What do you call it again? Distribution of possessions? That sort of thing."

"You mean…I can keep this Vespa?"

"Yup. You like it, right?" he said easily and sat backwards on it. He let out a boyish giggle. "Aoii told me how Vespas were the only thing that tripped the alarm of an abiding guy like you."

"That's not true… But is it really okay? I mean, these things are pretty valuable. Shouldn't her family have it?"

"We got permission. Don't worry."

"But it's only me. She and I just met□"

"I'm tellin' you, it's fine. It was Aoii's wish. Or should I say dying wish? Funny how they use the same character," Akiharu contemplated. "Anyway, that's what it comes down to."

"What do you mean, her dying wish?"

"Oh, okay. Before□last week, I guess? She told me. If something happened to her, if she got murdered like Emoto, I should give her Vespa to Ikkun. She's terrible. I wanted this thing too. I told her that, and you know what she said? 'Hell, no. Go die. Or actually, go live.' What the hell, man? We'd been friends since high school."

"If something happened to her…" Something? If what happened to

her? “What does that mean?”

“Dunno. Aoii must’ve been thinking about stuff in her own way, what with Emoto getting killed. But I bet she didn’t really think she’d be next.”

No, that’s not it…

That’s not it, Akiharu.

It has a deeper meaning than that.

You…really haven’t noticed?

“Anyway, just take it. Think of it as a present from her.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” I played with the key in the palm of my hand, then stuffed it into my pocket.

“But get your own insurance. I don’t know much about applying. Anyway, arrgh…” Still straddling the Vespa, he stuck his arms up toward the sky. After giving himself a good stretch, he slumped his shoulders. “Things have gotten crazy.”

“Yeah.” I absolutely concurred. “How’s Muimi doing?”

“Oh, her… She’s in bad shape. This might not be a nice way to put it, but honestly, I couldn’t bear to see her,” Akiharu replied, looking away. Perhaps he was recalling their encounter, perhaps not. Either way, his words revealed that underneath his flippant speech lay a true capacity for compassion.

Interesting, so he was that kind of guy. Such a decent human being that he couldn’t even acknowledge it himself. Believing he wasn’t anything special, he shuffled around his values. He was a wannabe bastard pretending to be no more than a hypocrite.

The complete opposite of me, a hypocrite pretending to be no more than a wannabe bastard.

“Afterwards, after Aoii got murdered,” he said, “I went over there once. To Atemiya’s place. It’s far inside Senbontera-no-uchi.

Anyway, she was even more depressed than Aoii was when Emoto died. Eh, but what can you expect? Those two were buds from way back in the day. I mean, they grew up together."

"It's that bad?"

"Yeah, you should've seen the way she glared at me. Me, man. Come on. Where does she come off glowering at me like that? Geez… And from the looks of it, she must not be eating at all. Can't be sleeping well, either. If we just leave her be, I think she'll die. I want to do something for her…but it's like, what can a guy like me possibly say? I've only known Aoii since high school."

Meanwhile, I had only known her for a short time in college. Even if that weren't the case, I had no words for her.

"She's gonna end up slaughtering whoever did this," Akiharu warned.

"Muimi?"

"Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't put it past her. That's how friends are, right?"

"But even if her victim was a murderer, she'd be committing a crime."

"Well, sure. You're right about that. But, y'know? Aren't there moments where you just toss laws and common sense and all that to the wind?"

"Toss…"

"Yeah. I mean they really are just moments, like a flash. Then you come back to your senses. You tell yourself, 'Hey, that's not funny.' Oh, but I guess that kind of thing never happens to you," Akiharu stated with a strange amount of confidence.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like you've already thrown everything to the wind." He chuckled, pointing a finger at me. "Heh, but I'm just stealing Aoii's

line… Say, would it bother you if I talked about her?"

"Not especially."

"In that case, gather 'round, buddy. I feel like talking about her. Apparently, the very first time she saw you, she thought, 'I'll probably fall for this guy'… You already knew she had a thing for you, right?"

"You could say that."

"To be honest, I didn't really get it at the time. It's weird saying this as a friend of hers, but she was a pretty desirable girl. I don't just mean she was hot. That has nothing to do with a girl being desirable. A pretty girl is just a pretty girl."

"Do you not like pretty girls?"

"I hate 'em. They always look like they're up to something."

That didn't seem like it was the pretty girls' fault to me, but I didn't bother interrupting.

"But with her, far from being up to something…she just spilled her guts about her plans nonstop. She let all of her emotions show. There was no front and back to her. She was like double-sided tape."

I didn't really follow his analogy.

"I've never met anyone in my life, including grade school, who exposed their insides the way she did. At first I thought she must be an idiot. Anybody would, seeing someone like that, right? You think, 'Aw, man, ouch!'"

"Ditto."

"Yeah. But she was no fool. She wasn't a ditz, either. It wasn't even that she was emotionally immature or that she had a low IQ or anything. She was actually pretty sharp and clever, in her own way."

“I agree with that, too.”

“As soon as I realized all this, I got jealous, to be honest. I mean, you or I can’t do that. It sounds simple enough to be able to cry when you want to cry, to laugh when you want to laugh, but guys like us, we can’t do it. We act tough or cool or whatever. Basically we’re all warped. That’s why Aoii was so lucky. She could get pissed off if something bad happened. She could enjoy herself to her heart’s content if something good happened. But I couldn’t even acknowledge my own envy. I’d feel irritated instead.”

“They had a class on it, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. Educational something-or-other theory. I’ve been taking that one too. What was it again? Modern youth lacks a sufficient vocabulary? I think that’s pretty true. We don’t have the words to express ourselves, so we don’t even know what we’re mad at. When we’re really just sad, we say we’re pissed off. But Aoii was different. She expressed what she felt.”

“You’ve sure got a lot of good things to say about her,” I said as passively as possible. “You didn’t ever consider going out with her?”

Akiharu gave a bashful chuckle, but the look on his face was less straightforward. “Well, I’m a guy, and I won’t say I never felt that way. Especially since I was a horny high school student when we met. I didn’t believe in boy-girl friendships back then.”

“Ah, I’ve heard of guys like that.” Personally, I didn’t believe same-gender friendships were possible, either.

“But it wasn’t really like that with her. This goes for Atemiya and Emoto, too, but it’s like, you look at them and they’re definitely easy on the eyes, but you just don’t feel the fire, or maybe go flaccid.”

“‘Flaccid’ is a good way to put it. I can’t say I don’t follow you on that.”

“Right? So that’s how it was with her. Anyway, she was a nice girl.

Emoto too, but she always sort of kept her distance. Not that it was her fault, but still."

"…"

"Well, anyway. I liked Aoii, romantic feelings aside. I didn't pray that she'd be happy or anything, but I didn't want to see her unhappy. I wouldn't let it happen. So when she fell for someone, I had to help out, y'know?"

"Huh."

"You're that someone, man."

"Yeah, I know. She told me herself."

"Oh." Akiharu nodded. "Listen, I don't know if I should be saying this…"

"You don't have to say anything you don't want to."

"No, I should. It's just that at first, I was opposed to it. Not just me—Atemiya and Emoto, too. Especially Emoto. She was unusually upset about it, saying stuff like anyone but him. She even threatened to cut off Mikoko if she pursued you."

"So you guys didn't like me."

"You're not surprised."

"I'm used to not being liked. In fact, it's being liked that's weird for me."

"Oh. But we didn't actually dislike you. We'd barely even talked to you. But the thing is—I still feel this way now, even knowing you're a good guy, but thing is, there's just something freaky about you."

"…"

"Like you could easily kill a person."

"Hey. Give me a break."

“Don’t get me wrong, man, I’m not saying you did kill someone, but it’s like you easily might and are repressing it and going about your life with a completely straight face. What you’ve got sitting in your belly would take ten regular people like me to choke down. It seemed like you’re just pretending to be human.”

“Hunh.”

I responded as coolly as possible, but inside, I felt like whistling. I would have if I knew how, and moreover applauded, and sung his praise. Being so thoroughly figured out in less than a month’s time was an entirely fresh experience for me.

Right… No wonder he and Tomoe were friends.

“But Aoii could be stubborn. She didn’t budge an inch, so we gave in. Instead we told her to let us test you. You know, to see if this Ikkun character was really right for her.”

“Is that what that birthday party was all about?”

“You guessed it. Well, it really was Emoto’s birthday, too.” Akiharu heaved an exaggerated sigh and hunched forward. “But if you die, end of story. That goes for Emoto and Aoii both.”

“Akiharu,” I said, deliberately flattening any intonation out of my voice. “Who do you think killed Mikoko?”

“Like I would know. I don’t even want to know. If I find out, I’ll end up hating, despising whoever it was. But I don’t like hating people and holding grudges and stuff. It totally sucks, am I right?”

“Huh.” I chewed on his words and nodded slowly. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Okay. So Akiharu made his compromises as he lived. What about me? How should I negotiate that business?

“……”

Right then, I felt somebody’s eyes on me and turned around. The only people there were tourists and a group of students on a field

trip.

“Um, Ikkun? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. It felt like someone was watching me.”

“Huh. Probably just your imagination.”

“Yeah, must be. But lately I’ve been getting that feeling once in a while when I leave my apartment.”

“Maybe it’s Aoii’s ghost or something.”

“Could be. Yeah. Maybe.”

He was probably only joking, yet for me, there was truth to his words.

Hup, Akiharu grunted as he hopped off the Vespa. “That’s enough chitchat for today. Anyway, it’s in your hands.”

“Yup, I’ll take care of it.”

“Be sure you do. It’s Aoii’s memento.”

“Yeah. I’ll call it the Mikoko.”

“Ohh,” Akiharu groaned. “You’d better not. Don’t be naming vehicles. Or else you might start feeling too invested.”

“If it’s a memento, I’ll feel invested either way.”

“Gotcha…” Akiharu nodded. “But don’t call it the Mikoko.” He stretched out once more. “Ahhhk. Well, I’ve passed on the Vespa, and I’ve said my piece about Aoii… I can die happy now.”

“Huh?” Something about his phrasing bothered me. A blurt of suspicion had leapt from my tongue, but I also expressed my doubt in words. “Hey, you’re making it sound like you’re heading into battle or something.”

“Hahaha. Nah, it’s just…” His mouth curled into a smile that was somewhat self-deprecating, or perhaps resigned. “I just figure I’ll

probably be the next one who gets killed."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. Or maybe it doesn't mean anything at all. Anyway, see ya later."

Without giving me a straight answer, he waved a hand at me, turned his back on Kitanotenman Shrine, and started walking. I thought to stop him, but decided against it a moment before I called out to him.

I sighed.

The bequeathed Vespa.

I wondered if it was really okay for me to use it, but somehow I also felt persuaded that if anyone was going to, it should be me. It certainly would make life more convenient. I wouldn't have to borrow Miiko's Fiat as much.

Maybe that was Mikoko's aim.

There was something a little amusing about that idea. Just a little.

"Guess I'll have to rent a parking space."

I didn't know how that was done. Figuring that I could ask Miiko about it, I went home.

* Editor's note: The fact that "Muimi" can mean senseless is reinforced by her sister being impossible.

2

Whoa. Is that Mikoko over there?

Yup, that's right. Long time no see, Ikkun.

Uhhh, oh. I get it. This is a dream.

Ahaha. You catch on quick, Ikkun. I guess that's about what you'd expect from such a realist. Or are you a romanticist? Or maybe you're a classicist. Half and half, maybe. And one-third pessimist.

I'm not sure that adds up.

True.

Hey, you're not really Mikoko, are you?

Oops. You got me. Well, who do you think I am?

Beats me. Who?

You decide. It's your dream, after all.

Okay, you're Tomoe, then.

Why do you think that? You might be wrong. I could be Kunagisa or Aikawa or Muimi or Akiharu or Miiko or Suzunashi or anyone else.

I can talk to everyone else whenever I want. I can't talk to you. You're the only person I want to talk to that I can't.

Liar. You know there are others.

No, no, no. I don't want to talk to them anymore.

Okay, fine. If you say so. Well then, let's talk. Let's discuss all the

things we didn't get to that day.

Really? Okay, sure. In that case, there's one question I've wanted to ask you.

What?

Are you filled with hatred?

For the person who killed me? The answer is just as you thought□not even a little bit. We talked about it that day, didn't we? I want to be reborn. It was myself that I hated. I don't think of my death as unfortunate in the slightest.

Sounds like you're just saying that.

Well, sure. Anything you put into words sounds that way. Hey, Ikkun, do you ever read mystery novels?

I don't read much in general. I used to, but now I just do it when I need to kill time. But I basically know what detective fiction is like.

I see. I'm a big fan. I'll read any fiction, but mysteries are my favorite. They're easy to understand. But one thing I don't like is how they always put so much emphasis on the criminal's motives. I know you must need a pretty good reason to do something like kill a person. After all, the risk is so high.

Yeah. A peer of mine said so, too. The risk is high, but the return is low. Of course, he's no longer human and can only prove his selfhood by killing others.

But you know, Ikkun, a motive is nothing more than an excuse. It's just pleading your case. When you think about it, it all comes down to the individual's values. Do you know this saying? "A gentleman kills not for himself, but for justice and for the sake of others." But hang on a second there. What does that mean, for the sake of others? What is justice? I don't know the answer.

I don't know, either. Sounds like a form of self-justification. I don't know what your killer was thinking. Or maybe I just don't want to know.

Why not?

Because it doesn't feel premeditated at all. I can't say the same for sure about how Mikoko died, but in your case it's like everything was totally uncalculated. Like your death was improvised.

Yeah, maybe. But does it matter? I'm not angry about it, and I'm not sad that I'm dead, either. Really, I'm not lying. I'm not the least bit resentful.

And so now you're going to be reborn as Mikoko?

Yup.

But she's dead too.

She is, isn't she?

How do you feel about that? Your own case aside, how do you feel about the culprit who sent Mikoko to her death? No resentment there either?

Not really, I have to say.

Isn't that a little cold? You were friends, weren't you?

It's a little funny hearing that word from you of all people.

I've got a friend, too.

Kunagisa? Or could it be Miiko? I know it's not Muimi or Akiharu. It must be the same for you, Ikkun, but I'm unable to feel sad even when a friend dies. I know how to be sad, but I just can't seem to set foot into that realm. My absolute store of emotions must be meager.

I can't say I don't understand.

Maybe it's distrust toward human beings? Like I've suffered some fatal wound and can't trust others. If you've ever faced persecution, you'll never believe in another human being for the rest of your life.

I think you're going too far there.

You don't think that.

Yes, I do.

No, you don't.

Okay, I don't.

You choose not to trust people if you know just how much human beings love to discriminate. Japanese do in particular. Let's say your friend is being persecuted by your group. It's one versus many. Obviously, the right thing to do is to stick up for your friend. But most people don't. They side with the group. Human beings crave allies. They don't even care who these allies are. All that matters is being allies, and having allies, and what kind of group it is doesn't matter at all. You could say it doesn't have any meaning or value. And once you realize this cruel fact, it's impossible to trust anyone. For example, do you have a family, Ikkun?

If I didn't, I wouldn't exist.

That's not what I mean.

Yeah, they're alive and well. They should be in Kobe or thereabouts. We haven't seen each other in years, though. Now that you mention it, Mikoko once told me that I didn't seem like the type to honor my parents. True enough. I haven't seen them since junior high. You probably could call me a bad son.

Sounds like your household has some issues.

Nah, not really. Not at all. In fact, we didn't have any problems. If I'd been aware of any to speak of, I probably wouldn't have turned out this way. What about you? Do you have a family?

Umm, I just can't think of them that way. That's why I picked a college that was far away and rented a room. Apparently, Mikoko and the others were facing similar circumstances.

You mean you couldn't trust even your own families?

Yeah, that's it. Not even yourself, to top it off. I don't remember who said, "There's nothing sure in this world," but that's about what it feels like. Like this delicate world might crumble away at the slightest nudge. But in reality, that isn't the world, but myself.

Sounds like you're a defective product.

You said it. I mean, think about it. Would you define as normal someone who's never cried since the day she was born? I can smile, but is that enough to call me a proper human being?

I'm the same way. I used to try to write it off as individuality.

What about now?

Not now. Individuality can go eat some shit. Being different isn't a good thing. Anyone who's ever thought about what being radically different means in a herd wouldn't mouth such nonsense. People talk about the elect, geniuses that leave their mark on history. Most of them are probably totally messed up. Still, they're ordinary people. Not a breed apart by any means. They're ordinary, yet broken. But Tomoe. From what you're saying, it sounds like you didn't trust Muimi, Akiharu, and Mikoko, either, and didn't have any faith in them.

Yeah. I won't deny that. Actually, I'll confirm it. Ikkun, at least you wouldn't misunderstand, and the fact is that it makes you feel inferior. You know what a nice girl Mikoko is. Akiharu's a good guy, too, and Muimi is the rare type nowadays who's loyal to her friends. Not being able to trust them or, try as I might, wholeheartedly think of them as friends makes me feel filthy. They've shown me so much love, and I can't give anything back.

I understand. You start to feel guilty.

Yeah. So it's good that a defective product like me passed on.

What about Mikoko?

That's Mikoko's problem. It's not anything that I, who am already dead, should be discussing. And, Ikkun, that's not really what you want to ask now, is it?

I dunno… There were a ton of things I wanted to talk about. No, actually there were only a few. By which I mean there was just one.

Go ahead.

Is it okay for me to be alive?

Ahh… Now, that's a fine question.

Do I, a specimen in a colony called humanity who doesn't benefit the whole, have a right to live?

That happens to be a vital issue for me too. But I died, so it doesn't concern me. Well. Well…in regards to that question, I only have one word for you.

Huh. Tell me.

It's "□"

Pipip pipip pipip pipip.

I awoke to an unpleasant electronic noise.

Ahh, I groaned and got up. Not from my futon, but directly off the floor where I'd been sleeping.

What an awful dream. It was hopelessly arbitrary, and so self-indulgent that it made me disgusted with myself. I thought I comprehended Tomoe's inner psyche after less than an hour of talking to her?

And yet I couldn't shake the odd feeling that all that had been the truth.

"What the hell am I doing holding forth against dead people?"

Could it be that I was still regretful? Pipip pipip pipip pipip□In other words□pipip pipip pipip pipip□even now, I□pipip pipip pipip pipip□

Nah, let's set that aside for now.

It wasn't my alarm clock but my cell phone's ringtone. Still on its default setting because I despised musical ones, this noise was plenty grating too, I mused, and pressed talk.

"Yes, hello?"

"…"

Hm. No answer. But I could sense breathing on the other end. Maybe the signal was weak.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

"……"

"Hello-o? Can you hear my voice? Not so much?"

"……"

Strange. Maybe my phone itself was broken. After all, I'd forgotten to take it out of my pants at the laundromat the other day. But modern electronics weren't so fragile. In which case, maybe it was a crank call.

"If you don't say anything, I'm gonna go ahead and hang up. You want me to do that?"

With a nostalgic glow that hardly suited the moment, I recalled the time Mikoko had called and gotten all flustered thinking she had the wrong number.

"Okay, I'm hanging up. Commencing countdown. Five, four, three, two□"

"…　　"

Whoa. I heard a voice, but it was too soft to make out the words.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't catch that. Could you repeat that, please?"

"…Kamogawa Park."

“I’m sorry? Kamogawa?”

“… I’ll be waiting at Kamogawa Park …”

A vanishingly faint soundwave that the human eardrum just barely registered—I couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman or an adult or a child. Since there was no discernible intonation, I couldn’t determine what, if any, emotion the caller was attempting to convey.

“I’m sorry? Please say that again. Or actually, who is this?”

“…Mikoko.”

The voice said only that, and the call ended.

I tossed the phone on the floor, stood up, and stretched my arms up toward the ceiling. It was low enough that I could reach it if I tried. Who lived above me again? Oh, right, the fifteen-year-old brother and thirteen-year-old sister. Those two shared a closeness that put a smile on your face. Well, they were doing their best to survive, so maybe that wasn’t an appropriate reaction.

The apartment building was three stories tall, with two rooms per floor, meaning there were a total of six rooms, a pair of which was currently vacant. The brother and sister upstairs lived next to an old hermit. He was into Christianity, which meant he clashed quite a bit with Miiko with her taste for Japonica, but by no means were they enemies. Both rooms on the first floor were unoccupied, but the landlord said someone would be coming in next month. Even a place like this had a pretty impressive draw of tenants.

“…End of looking away from reality.”

I plopped down on the floor and picked up the phone I’d tossed. Checking the history, I discovered that, sure enough, the call was from an unknown number. Time to think about this.

“Kamogawa Park… There’s only one.”

The caller would be waiting there? All right, fine. That was fine, for now. The problem was what came next, when I asked for a name.

What was the answer?

“Mikoko… It must mean that Mikoko.”

No one else had a bizarre name like shrine maiden child. But at the same time, it couldn’t have been Mikoko. She was dead. If dead people could use phones, the whole telecom infrastructure would’ve gone to hell in a handbasket long ago.

“…”

With only so much info, it did no good to give this further thought. It’s more like losing myself in thought, I joked to myself but ended up feeling a little hollow.

I deleted the call from the phone’s history and checked the time on the LCD display.

Eleven thirty at night. Wednesday, May twenty-fifth.

“…”

Um. How had I spent the day again?

I seemed to remember waking up before noon. Then I’d gone out to visit Kunagisa, run into Akiharu, inherited Mikoko’s Vespa, returned home to ask Miiko about parking spaces, gotten frustrated by the hassle, and gone to bed in a huff.

“In a huff? What’s wrong with me?”

What was I, a little kid?

Anyway, that was around two in the afternoon. Since I had no recollection of the time in between, I must have slept for nearly ten hours. That was enough to make even Sleeping Beauty pull a face. I’d been awake for less than three of the twenty-four hours in May twenty-fifth.

“I’ve been sleeping like mad lately…”

Anyway, my phone had rung. A bizarre, garbled call with no

context, just words. I didn't get its point, or rather, its point was the only thing I got.

"Now… The question here is what to do."

I had two options, more or less. I could obey and head down to Kamogawa Park or ignore the request. Common sense argued for the latter, but I didn't have a lick of common sense. Besides, I couldn't just sit there when the caller had uttered that name. It didn't take long for me to reach a decision.

I washed my face and changed out of my roomwear.

"I was almost missing this nonsense."

I left a note and exited the building. I straddled the Vespa, which was going to be parked illegally in a nearby alley until I could rent a space. I could've just walked, but Kamogawa Park was a bit far. The caller hadn't designated a specific meeting time, but I figured the sooner the better.

I turned east onto Imadegawa and drove straight ahead. Still, I wondered, returning to my train of thought, what was that dream all about? I don't believe or disbelieve in ghosts or souls or the afterlife. I've had my share of inexplicable experiences, and I'm not so stubborn as to refuse to give any credence to things I don't know firsthand. Having said that, this wasn't classical literature, so another person's will couldn't have entered my dream. It had been my consciousness, and mine alone.

"Lingering attachments? Wishful thinking?"

Either way, it was only an illusion. Nothing to lose sleep over, so to speak. The crucial detail was that it wasn't Mikoko but Tomoe who appeared in my dream. That was no doubt criminal of me.

"Face your crimes. That's your punishment."

I think it was Suzunashi who'd told me so one day in February. She was no psychic, but she saw right through me. She was the kind of woman who commanded respect but never made you feel inferior. Perhaps that was a rare thing.

I passed Horikawa, Torimaru, and Kawara-machi and eventually arrived in Kamogawa. Even if it was the middle of the night, I couldn't just ride a scooter through a park. I left the Vespa by the bridge and headed down to the riverbank, also known as Kamogawa Park.

"Ahh…what now?"

Kamogawa Park, in reality, represented a ridiculously enormous area. It wasn't spacious, exactly, just long. And the opposite side of the river was considered part of it. There wasn't an idiot in all of Kyoto who arranged a meeting here without specifying the street.

"Well, whatever."

I didn't have to take a random call like that too seriously. I began walking along the river in the direction of the current. According to my watch, it was past midnight. It was Thursday, May twenty-sixth. It occurred to me that there wasn't much left to the month of May. Come to think of it, Zerozaki had nearly killed me by this very river, under the Shijo Bridge if I remembered correctly. At the time, neither Tomoe nor Mikoko had died yet.

That felt like ages ago. And I didn't think it was just my imagination.

Hm?

I looked behind me. It was hard to tell because it was so dark, but there didn't seem to be anyone else. Yet I'd felt something.

A gaze.

"Hmm…"

I had felt it in the afternoon, too, when I was with Akiharu. He'd said it might be Mikoko's ghost, but what was a more realistic possibility? The most likely explanation was that the police had sent someone to tail me. After all, I was still a suspect in the deaths of both Tomoe and Mikoko.

"But come on, at this hour?"

Besides, there was no reason for them to sneak around. So on to the next possibility. A mysterious call, and somebody's gaze when I arrived at the location—there was really only one possibility.

"…"

A bit more alert now, I kept walking. The strange gaze seemed to vanish, however. It was around Maruta-machi Street that I began to feel like a doofus. What the hell was I doing here?

"Time to go home."

I climbed back up the embankment onto the road. I crossed the bridge to the other side of the river and descended to the park below. I thought it would be a nice change of scenery if I switched sides for the walk back. Looking out at the river, I saw some ducks swimming around. I suspected for a moment that "Kamo-gawa" had been named after some ducks in the river—what a lame sensibility—but the truth couldn't be so inane.

I thought about hurrying back to my apartment and getting to bed but realized I had just slept. Since I'd come out, it might not be a bad idea to take the Vespa for a spin around Kyoto. I could hug the river and drive all the way to Maizuru. I needed to get used to my newly acquired vehicle, and it would kill time.

Even as I pondered this, I walked on, and upon approaching Imadegawa Street, I spotted ahead of me a shadowy figure sitting on the ground. A bicycle lay on its side nearby. It wasn't clear in the dark, but it looked like the figure wasn't just sitting but had fallen. It lay motionless with its back to me. I wondered if it was a sleeping homeless person, but in that case there'd be no bike. Perhaps someone had gone drinking out in Kiya-machi and suffered a cycling mishap while heading home through the park. Though I had little sympathy, I couldn't just leave her there. The long, black hair had me thinking it was a woman.

"Are you all right?" I called out, but received no reply.

It almost seemed like the person was dead. Well, it was a definite possibility. Falling off a bike could kill you if you have a bad

landing, and all the more if you're drunk. I seriously considered passing on by, but it just didn't seem right, so I ran over and tapped the figure on the shoulder.

"Are you all right?" I checked one more time.

She didn't move an inch.

"Are you all right?" I asked a third time, and decided I should at least turn her onto her back.

The instant I gave the shoulders a tug, the figure, which had been completely still until now, flipped over with incredible nimbleness and sprayed some kind of mist in my face.

I tried to spring backward, but my timing was off. A dull pain assailed my left cheek. By the time I realized I'd been struck, I'd been slammed down without a chance to soften the fall and lay supine on the riverbank.

My attacker stood up.

Crap, whether it was being struck in the face or the mist, my vision wouldn't focus. What the hell was this stuff? My eyes didn't hurt enough for it to be Mace. Coaxing my unsteady body, I tried to push myself up with my left hand, but the attacker closed in mercilessly. I gave up on that idea and began rolling, spinning more times than was necessary to evade my opponent. When I was about thirty feet away, I rose up on one knee.

The shadow stood still before me. On the tall side, with a build… No. I couldn't see well. My vision wasn't recovering. Nor was it the only thing that was uncertain. My feet, my knees, and my head were just as bad, and I thought I might collapse any second. It wasn't that I felt sick. It was more like slipping into something. Yes. Put crudely, I felt…

Sleepy.

The knee supporting me crumpled.

An anesthetic spray… And this wasn't your ordinary anti-pervert

concoction, but some high-powered, fast-acting stuff. Not only my eyes, but all of my physical faculties had been disabled. Maybe in America, but I didn't think I'd ever face (alas, literally) its variety in Japan.

My assailant approached me, one step at a time. Even with my increasingly blurry vision, I could make out the knife in the person's right hand. A knife. Hitoshiki Zerozaki. Kyoto Prowler. I was starting to feel confused.

"…Why?"

Who, or why□that didn't matter right now. Even with my mind all fogged up, I knew how catastrophic falling asleep at this moment would be. It equaled death, or a comparable outcome.

Dammit. This was no time to be dallying, but I was instinctively averse to the idea of hurting myself. I couldn't help but hesitate. My attacker accosted me at a leisurely pace. Naturally, since I'd be asleep in no time. I knew this was my one and only chance.

Right hand or left?

I deliberated for only a moment before deciding on the right. "Geez, am I some kind of ascetic?" I gripped my right thumb with my left hand and, after wavering for just one more second, pulled as hard as I could in the wrong direction.

"NGHIGHAAaaaaaaaaaH!" A scream that even I found grating reverberated through Kamogawa Park.

It was now either broken or dislocated. Either way, my drowsiness had cleared up. My vision and physical functionality awakening, I recollected myself all at once. It felt as though my whole body was made up of nerve endings. I stood up to confront my foe.

My attacker was clad all in black, down to a black ski mask and black leather gloves. No hair was visible. The long black hair I'd seen before had been a wig. Although my vision had been restored, my attacker was still hard to make out against the dark background. This was why I'd thought of a shadow at first. It was definitely the

right attire for ambushing people. Far more like a serial killer than Zerozaki, far more the slasher.

“Dammit…who are you?”

There was no reply, of course. All I could hear was creepy breathing. Whoever it was pointed the knife at me and slowly closed in. I didn’t have a single item that might be used as a weapon, and I’d left my cell phone in my room. I couldn’t even call for help.

“Well, you gotta do what you gotta do…”

I got into a fighting stance and closed in from my end. Evidently surprised by this, Dark Garb came a second late with the knife. I attempted to deal a palm strike to the jaw, which surely missed as my opponent leapt backward and brandished the knife again.

The next to make a move, Dark Garb lunged at me with the knife. But the motion belonged to a novice. This person was nothing compared to Zerozaki, so dodging was a simple task. However, as I twisted my body, my right thumb brushed my side. Intense pain shot through me.

“□!”

I regretted breaking it. I could have just torn a nail off or something. Or, if I had to, I should have picked my pinky. Why did I go for my thumb? Was I a fool? I needed to know my limits.

Dark Garb didn’t let the opportunity slip away and gave me a hard shove. Already off balance, I fell and was once more on my back. Without sparing a second, my opponent mounted me. I reminisced with inappropriate serenity that the same thing had happened last month. How had I dealt with the situation then?

Without giving me a moment to think, the knife came down. It was aimed directly at my face□no, my carotid artery. I used every ounce of strength left in me to move my head to the right, mostly avoiding the blade. It managed to slice through a single layer of skin. I noticed that I was bleeding. Dark Garb pulled the knife back out

from the riverbank it had lodged into and readied another swing.

Just as I thought there was no escape this time, the upraised hand came to a halt. Looking down at me as if to observe me, my assailant tossed the knife away.

I had no time to contemplate what that action meant because a fist plunged into my face. The same cheek as before, the left. The next moment, my opposite cheek accepted a similar blow. Next, three strikes to the left cheek. Then the right again. Without so much as a wink of a pause, the attacker sustained an endless barrage of punches to my face.

I'd long since stopped thinking that it hurt.

I could feel my brain rattling.

"□□…"

Suddenly, the pummeling ceased.

But it didn't take long for me to learn that this was no act of mercy. Dark Garb clamped both hands around my left shoulder. It was easy to guess what the plan was. I tried to resist, but my body wouldn't listen. That paralyzing spray had eaten its way into my core. Coupled with the pain, I was sure to pass out any minute.

Except.

The deathly pain that shot through my left shoulder along with a terrible cracking sound jarred me back to a fully conscious state. My tormentor had dislocated my shoulder without the slightest consideration and moreover began to pound away at it.

"Nn…nghaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I let out a beastly shriek. I'd never known my vocal cords were so powerful.

What was up with this joker, anyway? What was all this for? It didn't seem to be about killing me. This wasn't homicide but pure destruction. To this person, I was nothing more than an object to be

dismantled. Something to be pulled apart like a chain-link puzzle.

Next, my assailant went for the right shoulder.

“Guh…”

I resisted, mobilizing every last bit of my regained consciousness. I raised up half my body, shook off the attacker’s grip, made a fist, and swung it right into the heart. The impact was strangely unsatisfying as if I’d punched a magazine. That black shirt seemed to conceal some kind of protective gear.

Having gripped my broken thumb in the process, I couldn’t use my right arm anymore. Dark Garb brushed it aside like it was nothing and reached for the shoulder again.

I wasn’t lucid enough to shake this off a second time. I heard a dull, cracking sound as if from a great distance, but the pain was right there with me. The tortuous sensations conveyed to my mind from both my shoulders were attaining heights that no numbing of the brain could downplay.

Then, just like before, the attacker pounded the newly dislocated joint and from there, as if exacting revenge, went straight for my heart. The sound of creaking bone. The shock spread to my disconnected shoulders, a dull pain following an instant behind.

“Khak… Haa…”

My mouth opened on its own, seeking oxygen. Devastating damage had been dealt to my lungs as well by the strikes’ impact. Whether that had been the aim or not, it made for a prime opening. My attacker gripped my face by the jaw. Hey, now, hey, are you serious? That’s the most painful thing you can do to a person. But there was no time to make inquiries. I thought I ought to chomp down on the fingers, but I let myself hesitate.

Dark Garb yanked my jaw forcefully. There was an almost delightful krik, a lighter sound than my shoulders popping, but the pain was incomparable, severe. Then, as had become the routine, swift uppercuts visited my dislocated jaw.

“……”

No voice came out of me. I couldn’t even be bothered to scream anymore.

Allow me to correct myself.

This was homicide. Destroying me didn’t do. It was clear now that my assailant intended to pummel me, and my existence, to death. The idea was to make me suffer and then kill me.

To dismantle me, piece by piece.

Most likely pondering how to inflict the next dose of agony, Dark Garb gave it a rest before grabbing my limp right arm by the wrist, holding it up, and gripping the thumb.

My already broken thumb.

“□□…”

Heheh.

I heard a chuckle.

It chilled my very marrow.

Someone who could beat and torture you this much and still have a good laugh.

There was nothing as fearsome and terrifying to me in the world.

“…　　……”

Muttering something I couldn’t make out, Dark Garb released my thumb in favor of my index finger. I could tell that the plan was to snap it. And not only my index finger. My middle finger, ring finger, pinky, then my left hand. Would my legs come next? Maybe it was going to be every bone in my body. Then my flesh would be torn apart. And only after I was thoroughly wrecked would I be murdered.

I had already lost the will to fight back. In fact, I didn't even know why I'd tried. I could have just let the spray put me to sleep at the outset. Then at least I wouldn't have tasted all this suffering. Breaking my own thumb, what a joke. Then again, this pain would have awoken me. I would have lived through torture either way. The outcome would have been the same. I had simply taken a different route. This was just like last time□a farce enacted with preestablished harmony.

I felt like I was watching myself from afar.

Watching myself about to be killed, from the opposite side of the river.

Watching this□

What was on my mind?

come on, really now.

so ridiculous.

trivial and pointless.

such nonsense□

"Whattaya doing over theeeeeeeere!"

A thunderous howl.

My vacant eyes turned to the direction of the voice□the opposite bank. But no one was there anymore. The boyish form had stepped into the river's flow and was charging this way.

I didn't even have to wonder who it was.

I knew him as well as myself.

“□eeeeeeere!”

Zerozaki.

Hitoshiki Zerozaki.

Hitoshiki Zerozaki, hollering, leapt out of the river and dashed up the bank. Dark Garb seemed momentarily startled by this invader, but after assessing the situation, released my finger and backed away from my body. Aware, no doubt, that Zerozaki wasn’t an opponent you could take on from a sitting position.

With a bit of distance remaining in between, Zerozaki hurled a single drawing knife. This wasn’t intended to score a hit but to force the attacker to stay away from me. Having arrived on this side of the river, Zerozaki inserted himself between us as though to shield me. Dark Garb went for the knife tossed aside earlier and brandished it defensively at Zerozaki.

“Phew…” Zerozaki exhaled deeply as if to calm his breathing. “Don’t be getting bullied, man. You almost seemed ecstatic,” he teased.

I thought about saying something in response, but with my jaw dislocated, it was impossible.

“Well, whatever. I guess you’re the one I should be talking to.” Zerozaki faced Dark Garb. “So what’s your deal? You probably don’t want to hear this from me, but you know you’re committing a crime? Assault and battery, attempted murder. Are you even aware? That there are things you mustn’t do?”

There were any number of quips I could make, but I kept my mouth shut, or rather, open.

Dark Garb took a step backward, apparently intimidated by this enigmatic threat, Zerozaki, who was all casual confidence□or even utter lack of caution at this point.

“Hmm. The defective product here has some pretty nasty wounds,

and this situation… Right now, I'm unable to kill people openly. So if you want to run away, feel free," Zerozaki said after a moment's thought.

Dark Garb took another step back and seemed to be sizing up the intruder and deciding what to do.

"What's the matter? I'm telling you I'll let you go, so hurry up and get lost. Quickly now."

No response.

Zerozaki let out a deliberate sigh. "If you still want to do this, I'll humor you until you breathe your last. I'll love you to bits before you even feel anything. I'm not such a nice guy that I'd show mercy to someone who's begging to be killed. But, hey, you'll get to be lucky number thirteen. I'll chop you up and line up the pieces for public viewing."

That did it.

Dark Garb spun around and dashed away in the direction of Imadegawa.

"Keheheh, go on, go on."

Laughing merrily, Zerozaki turned towards me. His good old tattooed face entered my field of vision only to go blurry an instant later. It seemed the anesthetizing effects of the spray were kicking in for real.

"Hm? Hey, don't doze off on me. At least give me your address first."

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. Since they were both dislocated, this hurt like a bitch, but by now I couldn't care less. "Ahhh…"

With the last few drops of my consciousness, and through a dislocated jaw, I provided my address.

3

My next memory starts at around nine in the morning on Friday the twenty-seventh.

“Yo. Morning, sunshine.”

Zerozaki was right by my pillow. I looked at his face in a daze, having no idea what was going on. He, on the other hand, seemed relaxed, and genuinely happy that I’d woken up.

“Man, this place is incredible. It was impossible to find from that address, and the residents are weird. I went to borrow some bandages and stuff from the lady next door, and she wasn’t even surprised by my face. That’s a first. But I’m glad you’re awake. You must’ve been pretty sleep-deprived, huh? You’ve been through a lot.”

“Um…” As soon as I planted down my right hand to prop myself up, a sharp pain ran through it, and I reflexively pulled it away with an “Agh!” I began to fall back down but managed to catch myself with my left arm.

“Nice one, man. It’s broken, you know. Your thumb, I mean. I jammed your jaw and shoulders back in place best I could, but there’s nothing I can do about a broken bone. I did some emergency first aid, but I think you’ll probably want to go to the hospital later.”

Looking at my right hand, I saw that my thumb had been stabilized with pieces of metal, wires, and a large amount of bandages. Though far from orthodox, it did seem to be the proper treatment. I could also feel something strange on my face. It seemed my jaw had also been plastered into place with gauze and band-aids. Zerozaki must have watched over me while I was sleeping.

“Thank you,” I expressed my gratitude.

“Forget about it.” He waved a hand at me irritably. “But your right thumb, that sucks. It’s gonna make life hard,” he insinuated with a chuckle. I guess another man’s misfortune tastes like honey even if you’re a serial killer.

“No worries. I’m ambidextrous.”

“Really?”

“I used to be left-handed, but I corrected it and became right-handed. But I hated this teacher who tried to tell me, ‘The chopsticks go in your right hand,’ so I switched back out of spite. That was in third grade.”

“Liar.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

I made an effort to return myself to full consciousness. I usually got up just fine, but my head was swimming.

“Hey, by the way, where’s the Vespa?”

“Huh? What?”

“Ah, nothing.”

It was probably still sitting abandoned by the bridge in Imadegawa. I just had to go retrieve it at some point. If it hadn’t been towed away, that is. More importantly, I was impressed, even amazed, that Zerozaki had carried me all the way here on foot with his small frame. He had some serious stamina.

Meanwhile, he didn’t seem to think anything of it. Looking far from fatigued, he asked, “But what the hell was that? I can’t believe this clumsy oaf got the better of you while you and I ended in a standoff.”

His reasoning was a little sketchy. “That thing with you was special. Yeah, well…” I lifted myself up, taking care not to do anything to

my thumb. “Yesterday… Oh, I guess day before yesterday? I got a call saying to come to Kamogawa Park. In retrospect, it was an obvious trap, but anyway, I fell for it. And that was the result.”

“Wow. What are you, an idiot?”

Indeed. “I know it was dumb,” I said. “But let me ask you something. Why are you still in Kyoto? Didn’t you leave?”

“Huh? How do you know?”

“The killings stopped.”

“Ah, right, that. Yeah, I did leave for a while. I got attacked by some weird lady in red. She was like this crazy maniac on neurochemicals. I hit her with my bike and she kept coming at me like it was nothin’. It’s a liter bike, man. What the hell kind of circuits are her body made of? Anyway, she was dead set on catching me, and I’d had enough of her, so I fled to Osaka. Then she came after me. So I returned to Kyoto cuz you know what they say, it’s darkest right under the lighthouse. Anyway, the day I came back, I was trudging around when I heard a howling like a whipped dog, and being the card-carrying dog lover that I am, I couldn’t just sit around and listen to that, so I ran toward the voice only to find that it was you getting your ass handed to you by that thing in black.”

“So that’s what happened. I gotcha.” He’d rattled out the second half awfully fast as if he’d gotten tired of explaining, but I did get the point. Basically, it was just luck. Or you could say Dark Garb was unlucky.

“Man, who the hell was that red lady, anyway? I thought I had run into a villain called The Crimson Cape.”

“That was Aikawa,” I told him. It wasn’t my way of thanking him, it was just that it seemed unfair to give Aikawa info on him and then not show him the same courtesy. Then again, I wasn’t sure a guy like me should be using a word like unfair.

“Aikawa?” Zerozaki’s tattoo twisted with suspicion. “Did you just

say Aikawa? You mean that was Jun Aikawa?"

"Oh, you know her. I don't have to bother explaining, then."

"Nah, I just heard about her from the Guvnor, that's all… Dammit, why, of all people, did it have to be Jun Aikawa?" Zerozaki clicked his tongue in annoyance. "No wonder I was no match."

"Is she famous or something?"

"She's infamous. Do you have any idea what they call her? Sturm and Drang, Mighty Chevalier, Laughing Red Tigress, Hermit Slayer, Desert Eagle… They strictly forbid me from having anything to do with her."

"You forgot one."

"Huh?"

"Humanity's Strongest Contractor."

Zerozaki fell silent. His expression was more serious than I'd ever seen him. Confronted with an opponent like that Jun Aikawa, even he couldn't take it easy. "Shit, man, this is not good. Too much of a riot…" he muttered with a solemn nod and rose to his feet. "Okay, I'm off."

"What? Already?"

"Yeah. I shouldn't be lingering about. It looks like I've got some things to think over. There's nothing to do here anyway, and you're in no shape to be talking at length. Besides, I'm a wanted man, you know, according to the police. I can't stick around in one place for too long."

"Ah, okay."

This was all true. Giving Aikawa a description of him also made the police authorities his enemy. For Zerozaki, spending a whole day in my room was already stepping into the red zone.

"What if you just turned yourself in?"

“Not a bad idea, but I’m gonna pass on that,” he said with a grin. “Just be sure you take care of your problems. I saw it in the paper and all. That Aoii girl you were talking about got killed, right?”

“Yeah…”

“Looks like we’ve both got some shit to sort out.”

“Yup, what a hassle.”

“Same here. But hey, these are the tracks we’re riding. Anyway, that’s it for me.”

“We probably won’t ever meet again. This time,” I said.

Zerozaki laughed. “I’ll bet. Farewell.”

With that, he made his exit. Left behind in my room, I returned to my futon and lay down. He had either done a fine job of taking care of me, or my wounds hadn’t been that bad to begin with, because I hardly felt any pain. Even so, I needed to go to the hospital for the broken bone.

Right now, though, I felt sleepy. Was the anesthetic still active? No, that didn’t seem plausible. So this was just regular old drowsiness. Why had I been sleeping so much lately?

“Ah, I get it. I was lying down but wasn’t sleeping.”

At last, I had reached my limit. Deciding to put off going to the hospital until after I had slept, I shut my eyes. I was getting myself in too deep. I kept trying not to think about Tomoe and Mikoko, but hadn’t succeeded. That dream was proof. In the end, the cases stayed unresolved in my mind.

For now, I just needed rest. The phone call, Black Garb, I would cope with all of that after I woke up.

“Heyyy.”

And yet.

I wasn't even allowed to go to bed. I heard knocking, and a voice. I got up and hobbled over to the door. When I opened it, Zerozaki had returned.

"What? Forget something?"

"Sort of. I was going to tell you one more thing." He entered the room and sat down cross-legged. I returned to my futon where I remained sitting up.

"So, what is it? You made such a big show of leaving."

"What do you want me to do, it slipped my mind. Now, check your phone." He pointed at my device, which still lay on the floor.

"Yeah? Why?"

"You got a few calls while you were sleeping."

"Huh. Around what time?"

"Just this morning. It kept going peepeepeep. So annoying. Isn't that what woke you up?"

I took a look at the phone's call history as I listened to Zerozaki. A familiar number□but whose?

"Ah, Sasaki," I remembered. The number belonged to Detective Sasaki Sasa, who was in the midst of a hard slog. Between eight and nine o'clock that morning, my phone had received seven calls from her number. "I wonder what she wants."

"I didn't pick up, so don't ask me. I shouldn't be answering your phone, right? If you're curious, just call her back."

"I will." I entered her number.

"Who's Sasaki again? I feel like I know that name."

"I think I mentioned her that time at karaoke. The hotshot detective."

“Oh, okay.” Zerozaki wore a complex expression. The word detective probably didn’t sit too well with him these days. Not that it made such a great impression on me.

The signal seemed to connect, and it continued to the dial tone. I waited a few seconds.

“Yes, Sasa here,” came Sasaki’s voice.

“Hello, it’s me.”

“Yes. What were you doing earlier?”

“Nothing, just sleeping.”

“I see… Wonderful.” She sounded strangely calm, like she was forcing herself to be calm. Which meant she wasn’t feeling calm at all.

“Sasaki, did something happen? Or is there something else you wanted to ask me?”

“Something did happen,” she said. “Akiharu Usami was murdered.”

“……”

Suddenly.

Everything.

Connected.

“Usami was?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“Do I seem like the kind of person who would tell such a lie? This

morning a friend discovered his body at school. He was strangled, just like Emoto and Aoii. I'm at the scene right now."

Now that she mentioned it, it did sound like she was trying not to attract attention or to disturb the posse there: police officers, medical examiners, and gawking onlookers, most probably.

Akiharu.

Hadn't he said he would be next?

Bizarrely enough, he turned out to be right.

"Is that so…"

It couldn't simply be a coincidence, though. If Akiharu had sussed out the truth, then he had some clear reason to foretell his own death. In which case, even though he saw it coming, he was murdered all the same.

"I'd like to ask you some things□"

"Before that," I interrupted, "I want to ask you about Akiharu's body. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead." As if she could sense through my voice alone that I wasn't my usual self, Sasaki made no objection. "I'll answer anything I can."

"I just have one question. Is there another 'x over y' left behind at the crime scene?"

"Yes," Sasaki softly affirmed after a pause. "But this time it's strange. We can't say anything for certain yet, but unlike with Emoto or Aoii, the evidence suggests it was written by the victim himself."

"……"

"Himself. But why do you ask? Have you thought of something? Did you figure out what x over y means?"

No, that wasn't it.

I'd figured out what the formula meant ages ago. In fact, at this point, it didn't mean anything at all. That wasn't the issue here.

"No, that's not what I'm getting at. Okay, so should I head down to the police station later?"

"I'd appreciate it. What time is good for you?"

"Around noon…no, late in the afternoon."

"Then I'll□"

I hung up while she was talking. Otherwise, I might blab. That was how far from calm I was feeling right then. I threw my phone at the floor□a violent gesture that was quite unlike me.

"Hey, what are you doing?" asked Zerozaki, taken aback. "Are you stupid? Why throw your phone? The poor thing."

"It's what they call venting," I answered flatly. "Suppressing your anger by taking it out on an inanimate object."

"Yeah, I know that much." Appalled, Zerozaki picked up the phone, checked to see that it wasn't broken, and put it down away from me. "What's the matter?"

"Akiharu was murdered."

"Oh my God," he remarked like this was just gossip, sounding oddly impressed. "That's the third person, huh? Good going. When did it happen?"

"I don't know when he was killed, but they just found his body. So the murder must have occurred between Wednesday afternoon and this morning."

"Hmm. Whatta riot. Three strangulations in just ten days or so. Crazy. Ah, but I guess I can't say that. And the perp? Whodunit?"

Zerozaki.

He was asking me like it was just trivia.

I sputtered, “The killer? You mean the one who killed Tomoe Emoto, who killed Mikoko Aoii, who attacked me in Kamogawa Park, and now has killed Akiharu Usami?”

“Who else would I mean?”

“It should be obvious.” My tone so cold that even I found it chilling, I spat out the name. “Obviously it’s Muimi Atemiya.”

MUIMI ATEMIYA

Classmate

Chapter 8
TRIAL
—(Mentality)

0

You actually know, don't you?

1

I don't deserve to be complimented on my personality even now, but back in the days when everyone still referred to me as a boy, it was abnormally unpleasant. To be sure, there was a time when I thought myself highly intelligent and gifted, when I was in love with myself and naturally looked down on those around me. I believed I knew things nobody else knew and noticed things nobody else noticed, and as the years rolled by, I grew arrogant.

Is that why?

If something puzzled me, I had to solve it right away. I was competent enough to do so, and it's true that applying my mind to the doubt and dissolving it always felt like I'd accomplished something, like I had become somebody.

However.

As I continued to solve various difficult problems that arose□no, after I finished solving all of them□I found that I was left with a void.

Everybody else just went on enjoying their lives without having to do any such thing. They lived happily without having to come up

with answers, or even questions, for that matter.

They laughed, they cried, at times they got angry.

I thought this was because they were ignorant.

I thought they were all just naïvely frolicking about in a minefield. One day they would come to curse their folly.

When they stepped on a mine and everything was over, they'd regret it.

But I was wrong.

I was just a lonely kid in a world of my making who answered my own unsolicited questions and felt smug about it. I seriously believed that theory could supplant experience and that if I wanted, I could be happy all alone.

I went about being a boy incorrectly.

Even so, the world didn't come to an end.

The game continued.

I was already so behind that there wasn't even a smidgen of a chance of victory, but life went on. There was a period where I considered ending it myself, and in fact I did try to do so, but I even failed at that.

In reality, maybe I wasn't even a bystander.

I was a loser.

Just a sad, pathetic loser.

And so at some point, I stopped being able to actively pursue answers to my questions. It wasn't that I became passive, it was that I became apathetic toward the doubts themselves.

Solutions had no real point.

If things remained vague and ambiguous and unsound, that was

fine.

In fact, that was better.

Causing real change was a role that should be left to the chosen ones, truly outstanding individuals like Humanity's scarlet Strongest and the Blue Savant, and was never my responsibility.

It was no job for a common loser.

No job for the teller of the tale.

Being oblivious to the mines, even if you stepped on one—that was the way to live.

Knowing about them but pretending you didn't, and sooner or later actually forgetting about them—why not live in such a way.

Even if I'm told it's too late, that it's just a compromise, that I'm only pretending to be human, I still think so.

The other side of the mirror—

Looking at a me who hadn't failed, I thought so.

Wasn't it simple?

If I hadn't failed, I would've been disqualified.

If being a serial killer was the alternative, then being a loser was fine.

I'm sure he felt the same way.

If being a loser was the alternative, then being a serial killer was fine.

Both statements were nonsense.

They were nonsense, and a riot.

Sure. That was fine.

Everything could be that way.

The girl who asked me if I ever felt like a defective product. The girl who said she liked me. The boy who prophesied that he would be the next to die. And you, who called me clueless.

Understood.

It may not be my role to change things.

But ending the nonsense that I'm responsible for starting is up to me indeed.

Following my style, I'll put a clean end to this.

Muimi.

I jammed the stiletto knife Zerozaki had loaned me into the keyhole and jiggled it around. In about a minute, I heard the sound of the bolt unlatching. I gripped the knob and gave it a pull. The chain was up, so the door only moved an inch.

"□□"

I hesitated for but a moment. I swung the knife in the gap and broke off the chain. The links were more brittle than I expected, and they scattered everywhere, one even hitting me in the face. I didn't care. The door released from its bondage, I pulled it open and entered the room.

The spectacle inside was enough to leave me speechless.

The wallpaper was torn up and shards of dishes strewn about on the floor. Although I knew it was rude, I thought it might be dangerous to remove my shoes and entered the room with them still on. As I proceeded further, the decor only got worse. It was pure destruction. There probably wasn't a single item in the space that remained in its original condition, no matter how small or large.

Literally everything had been demolished. Clothes torn to confetti and tossed around the room. Broken furniture. Ripped-up books. A shattered television screen. A smashed computer. The sticky, stained carpet. A mirror cracked from the center in an outward wave. An overturned wastebasket. Fragments of a light bulb scattered across the floor. A hamster torn limb from limb. A pillow and a bed with the insides on the outside. Vegetables, disassembled to the point that they lost all meaning. An overturned refrigerator. The air conditioner with a giant dent in the middle. A tea table scrawled with disturbing graffiti. A cracked fish tank and dead tropical fish nearby. Writing utensils split in two without a single usable one remaining. A clock that no longer worked. A shredded-up calendar. A strangled teddy bear.

And.

“What are you doing?”

Her, crouched by the window and glaring this way with cursing eyes.

Without a doubt, the most broken thing in this room was none other than her.

“Muimi.”

No reply.

Only that dreadful gaze piercing through me.

Her hair, that long, brown sauvage, had been diced up into something hideous.

Looking a little closer, I saw that remnants of that hair were strewn around the room. I never believed that hair was a girl’s life, as they say, but there was something terrifying about it all the same.

This was completely her domain.

A barrier barely maintaining its balance and threatening to break down any minute.

There was malediction in the air, all of it directed towards me. Muimi's death glare wasn't the only thing piercing through me. Everything in this thoroughly wrecked room was sending ill will, enmity, hostility, and malice at me.

It felt like the world itself had become my adversary.

"Could you not glare at me like that?"

"Shut up," she said in a deep voice. "Why are you here? How dare you?"

"Relax. I'm not here to save you or anything. I'm not that good a guy, and I'm no protagonist."

I used my right foot to clear a path in the debris on the floor and sat down across from Muimi. Right next to me was her destroyed cell phone.

"Aha. I see. So that's why Sasaki couldn't get a hold of you. She might come here directly at some point. Time's wasting."

"Why are you here?"

"Basically I've already figured it out," I deadpanned on purpose. Of course there was the fact that getting on her nerves now wasn't the best course of action, but I also couldn't speak in any other way in my current state. "You could say my imagination did most of the work. But there are some things I just can't seem to figure out. I wonder if you'd be willing to tell me."

"…"

"I'll take your silence as a yes." I paused for a moment. "I've got it down as far as the part where you attacked me. But why did you kill Akiharu? That's what I don't get."

"……"

"There should have been no reason for you to kill him."

"…Ha."

Hahahahahahaha, Muimi started laughing madly all of a sudden. She was laughing unfeelingly. Just laughing mindlessly.

Laughingly mad.

“With those wounds,” she reminded, glaring at me. “You must be stupid setting foot in here with those wounds. Nobody’s gonna come to your rescue here. Or is your knight in shining armor waiting outside?”

“Oh… Nope. That guy’s showing up the other day was just a coincidence to begin with. Don’t worry about him,” I said, recalling that night’s events. I touched my thumb and the gauze on my face. Of course my shoulders and jaw were still far from fully recovered. I was in no state to be confronting anyone. “Speaking just to that, at first I wasn’t sure. Dark Garb was wearing a knit ski mask and couldn’t have had long hair. So I thought it might not be you, but now that I see you’ve cut your hair, I’m convinced. I don’t suppose that was why you cut it?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

Fair enough, I shrugged.

“You’re just a more cautious guy than I expected,” she explained. “You notice when you’re being tailed. And I couldn’t attack you in your apartment because it’s such a run-down dump with paper-thin walls.”

“Yeah, the perfect environment, isn’t it?” I tried my hand at Aikawaesque sarcasm but couldn’t really pull it off. “Using Mikoko’s name to lure me out was a big no-no, though. Not a very clean method.”

“Don’t you ever speak that name.” She shot me the devil’s glare. “You have no right.”

“Hey, thanks.”

“I don’t want to talk to you, but I’ll ask you one thing. Why’d you reject Mikoko?”

“I didn’t really reject her…”

“Why?!”

She slammed her arm into the wall as hard as she could. The entire room seemed to shake, and I sensed no concern on her part for her own wellbeing. That merciless fist□it wasn’t like she had hit me, but it sent a shiver up my back.

Even the serial killer was preferable as an opponent to this destructor.

“Why? Why couldn’t you reciprocate her emotions? It’s not like it was a lot to ask. Why couldn’t you do something that simple? Why couldn’t you do at least that much?”

“I asked my question first. I’d like an answer. I’ll repeat it as many times as I need to. Why did you kill Akiharu? There was no reason for that. Everything else is clear, but that alone is still completely hazy. I said this before, but I know why you attacked me. You had your reasons. I can understand that. But why did you go kill Akiharu from there?”

“If I answer, you’ll answer my question?”

“I promise.”

Even then, she continued glaring at me for a while.

Several minutes later…

“It’s simple,” she said. “It was the natural thing to do.”

“Natural, huh?” I echoed as I tried to read her expression. “But Akiharu was your friend, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, he was a friend. I liked him. Just not to the point that I would never strangle him.” There wasn’t even a hint of a lie or a shadow of a bluff in her words or manner. “Being friends is no reason not to kill someone. It’s purely a matter of priorities.”

She was speaking honestly, from the heart.

I narrowed my eyes and gave a slow nod. Priorities. Friends. Matter of. Friends. I chewed on each of her words for a while in my head and searched for the right ones with which to respond.

“Or,” she asked me, “do you mean to tell me you would absolutely never kill a friend? No matter what, you would never do it?”

“Anybody I might kill, I don’t consider a friend.”

“Well, that’s just fucking splendid,” she scoffed. “What a hypocrite. Why couldn’t you share some of that phoniness with Mikoko? It’s your turn to answer.”

I repeated what I wanted to say three times in my head before putting it to my lips. “Probably because I didn’t like her.”

I thought she was sure to lunge at me, but Muimi didn’t even budge. She just sat and glared at me. “Oh,” she said gently. “I guess you’re not just some clueless jerk. You’re downright cruel.”

“And if I am?”

“I told you before, didn’t I? I’m certain I told you. That if you hurt Mikoko, I’d never forgive you.”

She was threatening to explode any minute, and with half-lidded eyes, I gave another shrug. “What about you, then? I find it incomprehensible. I understand the philosophy behind your actions, but I don’t know if you can say it was really for Mikoko’s sake.”

“I told you not to speak her name. Don’t talk about Mikoko like you know her! You don’t know shit!” exclaimed Muimi. “I know her. I know everything about her. We’ve been together since elementary school. I know her better than I know myself. If there’s one thing I don’t know, it’s how she fell for a cruel bastard like you.”

“That’s simple,” I responded without skipping a beat. Having already figured it out, it seemed all too obvious to me. “She just misread me.”

“…”

“An illusion. A misconception. An error. A miscalculation. An assumption. A darling young girl in love with love. She wasn’t a very good judge of character.”

“…Are you done?” Her rage was already beyond disguising. She was ready to detonate any time now. This was probably about as far as we’d get with mere words.

“Actually no, there’s one more thing. It’s a promise I made to Mikoko, so I’d better uphold it. Muimi.” My final question. Can you forgive your own“As a murderer, can you forgive your own existence?”

“What’s to forgive?!” She cracked at last. “I haven’t done anything wrong! Nothing! There’s nothing wrong with what I did for Mikoko! I’m the one who cares about her the most! I’m not looking for criticism from someone like you! It was all for Mikokodel! I’d do anything for her! I would kill or die without a second thought!”

“…”

For justice. For faith. For truth.

For others. For the sake of a buddy.

For her friend.

She killed.

“I loved Mikoko, unlike you! You don’t care enough about anyone to ever feel love, and you’ve got the gall to go on living with a straight face! You can’t do a thing for anyone! You’re just a defective product without a single human emotion inside you, so shut your goddamn mouth!”

Because it was for somebody else’s sake.

Without hesitation, without deliberation.

Without a hint of uncertainty.

Without even regretting it.

Without ever feeling shame or reflecting on her actions.

She killed.

“If only you hadn’t shown up! Then Tomoe and Mikoko and Akiharu and I would still all be living happily! If it weren’t for you! We all got along so well! Since elementary school and high school, and even in college! As soon as you appeared we all went to shit!”

Because you were an annoyance.

Because you were an obstacle, a hassle, a bother.

Because it was irritating, unstable, unpleasant.

She killed.

“It was all for Mikoko! She’s mine, and I’m hers! We’re best friends! I would kill my own parents for her, and she would kill even you for me!”

Because it was for someone important.

She would kill anyone.

She would kill any number of people.

Dozens, hundreds.

Herself or anyone else.

Even a best friend.

“I’m not wrong! I’m right! That’s why I’ll do it again and again! Even if I could go back in time, I would do the same thing! Mikoko forgives me!”

Not due to excessive force.

Not due to going too far.

As simply as taking a breath.

Like a random slasher, like a serial killer.

Like she was a defective product, like she was no longer human.

She killed.

“I□I forgive myself!” she screamed, stomping on the cluttered floor.

“…Huh.” As I watched her, my eyes were no doubt terribly calm. “Are you done?”

She shot me a glare. I didn’t care.

“That’s enough, then. Please, shut up. Your voice is offensive to the ears and your presence offensive to the eyes. So you do whatever you want to do and say whatever you want to say. Great. Does that satisfy you? You’re completely broken. Bankrupt.”

“Bankrupt? Me?”

“Exactly what have you done for Mikoko’s sake? You’re just putting the blame on her, aren’t you?”

“Like you know a damned thing…”

I could tell she was struggling to refrain from lunging forward. If I hadn’t brought up Mikoko’s name, surely she would have.

Right now, Mikoko Aoii was the only thing keeping Muimi together.

“Then…” She spoke in a low voice like a growl from the depths of hell. “What about you?! You don’t feel the least bit responsible for her death?! Answer me!”

“I don’t. Not at all. The dead simply died.”

“…”

Muimi turned pale. Her mind was already past enraged. Nevertheless, I made no attempt to cut my speech short. I just continued on, spouting words like a machine.

“I’m not so arrogant that I’d attempt to interfere with other people’s

lives. People should take responsibility for their own actions. You're no exception."

"What's your problem? How can you think that? How can you have such a disgusting outlook? You're nuts. You're not human."

"I just don't approve of clinging to others to the point of swallowing them up. I'm annoyed by people who live life saying for so and so's sake, for so and so's sake, like that's supposed to grant them a full pardon for whatever they do."

It was like looking at myself, in fact.

"I once said you and Tomoe were similar, but I was mistaken," Muimi growled as if to curse the devil himself. "Tomoe was the embodiment of an inferiority complex, keeping her distance from everyone, but you… You're just plain hostile."

"Hahh…" I let out a sigh on purpose. I couldn't argue with her, nor did I feel like doing so. What I wanted to do was ask her if she'd realized that only now. Things that are similar but not the same are, in the end, different. It was as simple as that. "Whatever. Do what you want. We're just two people who have nothing to do with each other. I don't have any interest in getting in your way…but killing Akiharu was a bad move, Muimi. They'll be coming to arrest you soon enough. I doubt that's what Mikoko wanted."

"I could care less about the law. So I'll be arrested. I bet I will. But there's still time before that. Plenty of time to make you suffer. To kill you."

Muimi got onto one knee and put herself at eye level with me. She held aloft a gleaming knife she had apparently been pointing at me for some time. It was the very knife that Dark Garb had used that night. The one that had grazed past my carotid artery.

"Nothing's gonna get in the way this time."

"What will killing me accomplish?"

"Who cares? Talk all you want, but it's time for you to take responsibility for hurting Mikoko."

“……”

Ahh, sure.

So in the end, Muimi, you’ve missed the point. You’ve been going on and on about how you did it all for Mikoko, all for Mikoko, all for Mikoko, but that’s just an excuse, pleading your case, an apologia.

Your actions are spurred by:

Plain jealousy toward me.

Ordinary remorse towards Mikoko.

Your own boring sense of guilt.

That’s all.

“Enough of your nonsense, Muimi,” I stated, ignoring the knife in her hand. “So are we going to pick up where we left off last time? You’re going to beat me and beat me, hurt me and hurt me, and inflict and dish out every kind of pain there is, and then kill me off?”

“That’s right.”

“You don’t say.”

I clutched my right forefinger with my left hand.

“So for example, you might break my fingers, like this?”

I forced it backward, breaking it myself.

A sound□

Like a branch snapping off.

Muimi’s face froze in shock.

An overwhelming, maddening pain ran through my hand, but I didn’t even flinch and displayed my mangled digit.

“Satisfied?”

“…”

“You’re not, are you? Why would you be? That’s not nearly enough to cheer you up. You’ve hated me and hated me and hated me, so there’s no way you’re satisfied yet. Because if it’s for Mikoko, morals, laws, and common sense don’t mean a thing.”

“Uh…rrr.”

Muimi was flustered.

For the first time, consternation blended into her emotions.

I didn’t care about this either.

“I guess the middle finger is next?”

Saying this, I clutched it.

It was as if I were a doll.

A doll had no nerves.

A doll had no heart.

So it could just snap its own bones.

Crack.

“Ring finger next?”

I bent my ring finger the wrong way.

Pop.

“And finally, the pinky?”

I moved my pinky in an impossible direction.

Grik.

“Well, my right hand’s a complete wreck. I won’t be able to defend myself very well now.”

“Ah… ah… ah.”

The blood was draining from her face. This wasn’t just fear, but terror. A fundamental awe and fear for something beyond one’s comprehension. It was a fatal wound of an emotion that far outstripped anger.

“Shall we continue to the left hand?”

I stood the four fingers on my left hand on the floor.

From there, I threw all of my body’s weight onto my left arm.

Crack crack crack crack.

A quartet of pleasant light notes.

“Why don’t we twist ’em around too?”

Crunch. Crunch crunch crunch.

“Now let’s see if I can still applaud□”

“Wh-What the hell are you doing?!” screamed Muimi, caught up in the moment. She tossed the knife aside and grabbed my wrist. “Y-You’re crazy! What is this?! What are you doing?!”

“I’m saving you the trouble. It’s like you did it. Or, by your logic, like Mikoko did it. Right?”

I held up my eight hideously gnarled fingers before Muimi’s eyes. The grotesque sight must have been unbearable even if you were nuts because she reflexively looked away.

“D-Doesn’t that hurt?!”

“Who knows,” I replied coolly. “No big deal. Not to me, anyway. No matter how much I get tortured or beaten, I don’t feel a thing. You could even kill me if you wanted. Do whatever. But to me, death

would be nothing more than a release.”

“What are□”

“I’m so damn sick of everything. Of living, of the people around me, the people not around me, the various intentions that make up this world and all the ones that don’t, of you, of Mikoko, and of course of myself. It’s all just a damned headache. I’m the one who’s disgusted here. Living only brings pain. I see no value in this place. Frankly, I don’t give a rat’s ass if the world gets wiped out tomorrow or if I’m wiped out today. In fact, I’d be glad. So killing me would be pointless. I wouldn’t have minded if you killed me the other night, either.”

“…!”

“Still, I’m sure killing me will put your mind at ease. But it won’t amount to revenge or justice or loyalty to a friend. It’s just you venting. Nothing more than a distraction from the truth. You’ll cheer up, but that’s all. Causing me pain will clear away your jealousy, making me suffer will help you forget your remorse, and killing me will cleanse your guilt, but that’s all you’ll be doing.”

“You’re wrong!” Muimi clutched her head and shook it like a madwoman. “You’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong! Don’t turn this around! You’re so full of shit! I did everything for Mikoko□”

“Now, go ahead and kill me. Kill me with your own hands. The world will just go on.”

Just for yourself.

Without saying it’s for anyone else.

Without giving excuses or pleading your case.

Kill me of your own volition.

Commit your profitless crime.

“Urrrr…raaahhhhh!”

She picked up the knife. With a spiteful, demonic glare, biting down on her lip as if choking back a curse, she grabbed me by the neck with all her might. With her other hand, she dug the edge of the blade one layer of skin deep into my neck, right along that carotid artery.

And she hesitated and paused and held and wavered.

“Urrrrrrrrrrrr!”

And she stayed that way.

“……”

I closed my eyes and left it up to time.

But I soon got tired of this as well.

“I wonder,” I said, casually brushing her hand aside and distancing myself from the knife.

Standing up, for a while I watched Muimi huddling on the floor and groaning, then gave my back a good stretch.

“When did people stop being able to do things just for themselves, Muimi?”

It was always out of some sense of duty or of justice.

Out of some feeling of fellowship or of friendship.

“Don’t you think it’s all just nonsense?”

Muimi gave no reply. I wasn’t sure if I should have been asking the question in the first place. I who, let alone for myself, hadn’t done a thing even for others’ sake. I who had never done anything for anyone’s sake.

“What am I supposed to do?” Muimi asked as though she were seeking my help. “What could I possibly do for Mikoko? What do I need to do for her? What are you trying to say I should do?”

Don’t ask me that.

That just leads to a dead end.

Thinking you can do something for others is nothing more than a happy delusion. But once you realize it’s only a delusion, as you have now, there’s no place left to go. Just like Tomoe and I, you’ve got no place left to go. What’s ahead of you now isn’t even despair, but a pitch-black void of absolute nothingness.

It’s a dead end.

But I had no intention of telling her things we both already knew. Even if she didn’t know, I wasn’t about to go out of my way to tell her.

“To be honest,” I said, turning my back to her, “I came here hoping you’d kill me. I could have you do that. You wanted to kill me and I wanted to be killed. Seemed like a match made in heaven. So I thought I’d come get it over with already. But I’ve changed my mind. I won’t let myself be killed by someone like you.”

“Then…” uttered Muimi, staring at the floor.

I took my eyes off of her and headed for the entrance.

As if a stressed-out strand of yarn had torn to shreds, with a tragic air, Muimi choked out a sentence muddled with tears and sobs.

“Then kill me now.”

“Nah. Die on your own,” I replied curtly, and didn’t look back.

I had no desire to turn around.

2

“Yo. Is it over?”

As I exited Muimi’s condo, Zerozaki, leaning against a telephone pole, waved a hand and called out to me. Walking past him without stopping, I answered, “Yeah, it’s over.”

“I’ll be damned,” he said, catching up to me and matching his pace to mine. “Whoa! What the hell happened to your hands? Am I crazy, or did the number of broken bones multiply by nine?”

“Yup, it did.”

“She broke them? Holy cow, man, Atemiya’s like some hardcore ascetic! That’s some risky business.”

“Nah, I broke them myself. All of them.”

“You dumbass… Come to think of it, you did say you were the one who broke your thumb, too. Are you a masochist? Are you a freaking masochist? Doesn’t that hurt? Do you not feel pain? Have you had a lobotomy?”

“It hurts like shit. It hurts so much I can’t even faint. I might cry. I’m actually headed for the hospital right now. We’re near Nishijin Hospital, aren’t we… I’m not really a masochist, no. The situation just called for a little shock treatment.”

“You know, broken bones don’t always heal properly. You may never play baseball again.”

“No worries. If it comes to that, I’ll just play soccer.”

“Liar.” Zerozaki sighed like he was fed up with me. “So how’d it go?”

“Who knows? From here it’s just a matter of sweeping up the mess. That’s Sasaki and Kazuhito’s domain. I’m sure they’ll be thorough about it. Muimi will be arrested, all the facts will come to light, and that’ll be that.”

That is, if Muimi maintained her sanity for that long.

That is, if she was even alive.

Zerozaki folded his hands behind his head with a disappointed expression. “Aw, man. That’s not dramatic at all. Couldn’t it at least have been a little more romantic?”

“What can you do? This is reality.”

“Mmm. I guess. Say, do you have parents and stuff?”

Zerozaki had suddenly posed a completely unrelated question, but I had a feeling he would, so I wasn’t surprised.

“Yeah, I do. In Kobe. I trust they’re doing fine.”

“Oh. So are you grateful to them?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, how do you feel toward them?”

“About what?”

“About bringing you into this world, dammit.”

“What about you, Zerozaki? Though I probably don’t even have to ask.”

“Answer should be obvious.”

“Yeah, it is.”

For an instant, we shared a glance.

“I’m sorry…”

“For being born.”

“Me, I just dig Dazai more than Akutagawa,” Zerozaki said, laughing.

“Me, I like Mushanokoji best,” I said, not laughing.

“How do you feel about Kan Kikuchi? I’m kind of a fan.”

“I don’t read him. In fact, I don’t really like reading.”

“Oh yeah, you told me that, didn’t you? Huh.” For some reason, Zerozaki gave a convinced nod. “By the way, how about giving me my knife back? I don’t have a whole lot of that type.”

“Oh, this. Listen, Zerozaki. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to part with it? It’s really handy. You can unlock doors without any skills to speak of.”

“Those things are expensive, jerk. Can you pay me one million five hundred thousand yen right now?”

“Geez, why’s a little steak knife like this so expensive?”

“Cram it. So what’s it gonna be?”

“How about if I pay you in one hundred fifty annual installments?”

“We probably won’t actually meet again.”

“Ah, right.”

With no other alternative, I reluctantly gave him back the knife. He took it by the handle, spun it around, and tucked it inside his vest. Evidently he had knives placed all over his body. Seriously, what if he tripped and fell?

“By the way,” Zerozaki said. “Maybe it doesn’t matter, but there are still some things that bother me. How about answering a few questions?”

“Sure. What?”

“It seems to me that when Emoto and Aoii were killed, Atemiya had a solid alibi both times. She was at karaoke in Emoto’s case and with her sister in Aoii’s case. I don’t know how it was with Usami and you, but how could she have killed those two girls? And it seems like you realized Atemiya was the killer as soon as that detective called about Usami being murdered. And you already seemed to know that she was the one who attacked you in Kamogawa Park, too. How the hell did you know it was her? When did you realize that?”

“Hmm. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

“Really?” Zerozaki tilted his head. “What do you mean? Was it just intuition or something? Or was it because all the other people involved were dead, and it had to be Atemiya by default? Who are you, Kindaichi?”

“No. But do I have to explain? It might get cerebral.”

“Hey, I don’t mind. Come on, you made me tell you all about my prowling exploits. Whatever happened to give and take? Come on, leave me with a good memory.”

“What are you, dying?”

“I might die. A red monster’s been chasing after me.” Indeed, it was entirely plausible. It was even possible that Aikawa would appear before us there and then. Given that fact, Zerozaki’s life was like a candlelight flickering in the wind.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right… Okay, so how far back should I go?”

“Start at the beginning, of course. How’d you know Atemiya was the one who killed Emoto, Aoii, and Usami, and attacked you?”

“See, there’s your first mistake,” I said. “Muimi didn’t kill Tomoe or Mikoko. She had alibis, so that should be obvious.”

“Wha?” Zerozaki’s jaw dropped.

“She killed only Akiharu. And she assaulted me. That’s all she did. Oh, and she won’t be getting her apartment deposit back.”

“Hold on.” Zerozaki spun around in front of me and grabbed me by the shoulders. His face wore a grin, but he wasn’t smiling. “Just a few hours ago, didn’t you go on confidently and matter-of-factly about how ‘the one who killed Tomoe Emoto, who killed Mikoko Aoii, who attacked me in Kamogawa Park, and now has killed Akiharu Usami’ is ‘obviously’ Muimi Atemiya?!”

“Indeed,” I answered shamelessly. “But you see, the thing is that I was confidently and matter-of-factly lying. Time was of the essence, so I just kind of traced the surface. It’s actually a little more complicated.”

“Hang on. So what the hell have I been doing for the past few hours, wondering, How in the world did Atemiya manage to kill those two? What a puzzling brain-teaser!”

“I told you. I’m a liar.”

“I wanna kill you,” Zerozaki muttered, sinisterly you might say, before returning to my side. I chose to put a modest distance, just a single step, between us. “Err, let me rephrase the question then. So who killed Emoto? If it wasn’t Atemiya, who was it?”

“Mikoko Aoii,” I answered with her name alone. Zerozaki had seen it coming at least well enough not to vocalize his suprise. But he furrowed his brow at me, crinkling his tattoo.

“So then who killed Mikoko Aoii? Don’t tell me the punch line’s that it was you…”

“Nope. That was just a suicide.”

“Suicide?” This time he was clearly surprised. “Aoii killed herself?”

“Yup. That explains nobody showing up on the security cameras, doesn’t it? Of course it does; there was no culprit. Anyway, Mikoko committed suicide, which made Muimi go bananas and kill Akiharu and make an attempt on my life. But I didn’t want to be killed, so I took measures. There you have it. QED.”

“You’re using it wrong,” Zerozaki retorted, then cradled his head. “Hang on, hang on. Explain this to me step by step. You can’t just

give me a big, crazy summary like that up front."

"Fine, I'll explain properly. Uhh, so you understand the part about Mikoko killing Tomoe, right? Okay so far?"

"Yeah. No, wait, not okay. Aren't you the one who vouched for Aoii's alibi? Or your neighbor, actually? Don't tell me you and Aoii were in cahoots."

"No. Why are you so suspicious of me? What happened is that as far as that night goes, I was thoroughly tricked. Miiko too. Well, she wasn't tricked, exactly, she just didn't notice."

"What are you talking about?"

"Try thinking about it for yourself. Tomoe was killed by Mikoko. If you know that, there are only so many possibilities."

"Uhm," pondered Zerozaki. "So she left Emoto's apartment with you? And you got a call from Emoto when you were around Nishioji Nakadachiuri. You walked back to your apartment together, and then you left her with your neighbor, Asano. Then the next morning Aoii woke up early, went to your room, then went to Emoto's place… Oh, is that it? When she was supposedly 'discovering' Emoto's body, she was actually killing her?"

"Not likely. That conflicts with the established time of death. So it must have been at night."

"So she snuck out of Asano's apartment?"

"Couldn't be. Miiko is highly sensitive to noise and would have caught on, and she has no reason to cover for Mikoko."

"Then what was it, some kind of remote-control trick? Then again, this was a strangling, not some locked-room mystery."

"So there's only one possible scenario left."

"What? Does it have something to do with that 'x over y' thing?"

"Nope. You don't need to worry about that. It's like a side order of

fries. Just set it aside."

"Come on, just tell me already. You sure know how to beat around the bush."

"It's simple. There was no point at which Mikoko could have interacted with Tomoe once we left her apartment. Which means the murder took place before we left."

"Huh? What does that mean?" Zerozaki asked suspiciously. "If that's the case then all the premises crumble. Emoto was killed between the time she called you and three a.m., right?"

"Suppose," I said, "that the call hadn't occurred. Then couldn't Mikoko have killed her?"

"No, it's still impossible. You left the apartment together."

"Aha. We left together, but not at the exact same time. There was a slight lag. I mean incredibly slight. But I left the room before Mikoko did."

"…?"

"As I was leaving, I had to put on my shoes, right? At that time, naturally I wasn't facing the interior. In other words, I had my back to Mikoko and Tomoe. I was looking at my shoelaces." I raised a foot to show him. "What's more, there was a door between the hallway and the room. I couldn't see what they were doing in there."

"Wait a minute. There must have been a scream or some kind of noise. Even if it was happening behind you, there's no way you wouldn't have noticed someone being killed."

"If it was a stabbing or bludgeoning, maybe. But you can't scream if you're being strangled. There were noises, but I never would've guessed it was the sound of someone being killed. I thought Mikoko had tripped or something."

"Ahh." Zerozaki began rubbing his temples. If you tried hard enough, you could discern a passing resemblance to Keiko Nose. But

you had to really try.

“Wait. It doesn’t take you ten to twenty minutes just to put on your shoes, does it? Supposing what you’re saying is true, even if Aoii did strangle Emoto, she wouldn’t die that fast. People can live for up to ten minutes without breathing.”

“Zerozaki, could it be that you’re misunderstanding the situation because you’re a serial killer who specializes in knives? Strangulation victims don’t all necessarily die from suffocation. They can also die from lack of blood flow to the brain. You just have to pull upward, like this. If you manage to cut off the carotid artery, it takes less than a minute. If you’re good, it only takes a couple dozen seconds.”

“Really?”

“Really. So after that, Mikoko opened the door, looking completely innocent, and came out to the entranceway. At that point, she was blocking my view, so I couldn’t see into the room. Then we left Tomoe’s apartment together and exited the building.”

“Yeah, that all adds up, but…” Zerozaki still seemed dissatisfied. “That’s all assuming you hadn’t gotten the phone call. But Emoto did call you. So she was still alive even after you left the building. Don’t tell me she came back to life for an instant.”

“You keep coming up with nonsensical hypotheses. Of course that’s not it. Tomoe died instantly, so it’s simple. Awfully simple. If you just think about it, you’ll figure it out. The call was for me, but it wasn’t on my phone, okay?”

“Right… It was Aoii’s, wasn’t it? But wasn’t that because she didn’t know your number?”

“Let’s go back to the basics for a second here. What is the advantage of a cell phone to begin with? It’s that it lets you make a call from anywhere. That call didn’t necessarily come from Tomoe’s apartment. And on top of that, phones don’t let you see the caller’s face.”

“You’re saying Aoii had an accomplice? And the accomplice used Emoto’s phone to pose as her?”

“Uh-uh, there was no accomplice. I’m pretty sure this was a spontaneous crime to begin with. The murder weapon seems to indicate that as well.”

“You mean a thin strip of cloth?”

“Yeah. Most likely, it was the ribbon from the present Akiharu gave to Tomoe. A ribbon is fairly well cut out for strangling someone. It’s flexible and fits to your skin. It works even better than rope. But anyway, considering the murder weapon was just something that happened to be there, not something that had been prepared, it’s hard to think it was premeditated.”

“Then who made that phone call?”

“Mikoko didn’t need an accomplice. She placed the call herself,” I said. “She just had to have Tomoe’s phone in her pocket and to speed-dial her own phone from it. Of course there’d be no one on the other end, but Mikoko pretended it was a call from Tomoe. And then she passed the phone to me.”

“But when you were on the line, didn’t you speak with somebody? Wasn’t she trying to tell you something she had forgotten?”

“Yeah, but that was Mikoko. At that time, I was walking a step ahead of her. Same deal as what happened at the apartment. I didn’t realize that Mikoko was right behind me whispering into Tomoe’s phone. By the time I turned back around, she had already slipped it back into her pocket.”

The way Tomoe was murdered.

The way an alibi was created.

Without question, both methods were extremely risky. If I had just turned my head around on a whim, the whole jig would’ve been up. But if you thought about it, the odds of that happening were fairly long. The risk was big, but the chance of success was extremely high. If you weighed things in terms of value, it was certainly a risk

worth taking.

“Anyway, that gave her an alibi. Then the next day, she went to Tomoe’s place, returned the phone, and called the police. They say you should suspect the person who discovers the body, but she had an alibi, and she must have hidden the murder weapon in her own apartment or something before going back to Tomoe’s.”

Of course, Mikoko was the only one who knew all of the minute details, so you’d have to pay her a visit to get the full story, which sure wasn’t happening. But that was the gist of it. I might not have had every single fact right, but it seemed close enough to the truth to be called a solution.

Mikoko probably wrote that “x over y” formula when she “discovered” the body. The previous night, she had neither the time nor the notion to do such a thing.

“Well, that definitely makes Aoii sound like the killer. But it’s still just a possibility—I mean, you don’t have any proof, do you?”

“Well, no. You’re right.” I wasn’t loath to draw that line. “Strictly speaking, there’s no proof. Sure, it could’ve been some burglar.”

“Don’t you have, uh, any sort of pride?”

“At any rate, that explains Tomoe’s case. Got any other questions?”

“Argh,” Zerozaki groaned with a frustrated expression, like he wanted to say something but couldn’t find the right words. “Nah, forget it,” he cried uncle. “Okay, on to Aoii’s own case. How was it a suicide? Even the police think it’s a homicide, don’t they?”

“Well, there are various reasons, but her motive for killing herself should be obvious. After she murdered Tomoe, her conscience got the best of her.”

“Murderers have a conscience?”

“Not everyone’s like you,” I chided, facetiously. “That’s what was written in her suicide note, anyway.”

“Ah. I guess if it was in her suicide note, that pretty much settles it… At least it proves that Aoii chose to die. I sure don’t understand it, though. Suicide, huh? I guess there are all sorts of killers in this world. But if she was going to do that, she shouldn’t have killed in the first place… Hey, hold on a sec.”

“Huh? What?”

“What do you mean, suicide note?”

“It’s an essay of sorts you write before committing suicide to leave the world with your thinking. Not to be confused with the will and testament.”

“Thanks, Detective Columbo.” Mouthing those words, Zerozaki simultaneously kicked me in the hand. Naturally, this was excruciatingly painful since all of my fingers were broken.

“What’re you doing? What if my bones don’t set properly?”

“Play soccer. So what’s up with this suicide note? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Yeah. You see, before that… Well, think about it. Didn’t it seem strange to begin with?”

“Didn’t what seem strange?”

“What do you think?” It was the very thing Sasaki had pointed out. “Look at me, Zerozaki.” Me, a loser of a human being who broke long ago. A failure of a human who didn’t have a single intact nerve left. Who desired death more than anything else. “Do you really think I’d get so sick just from seeing the strangled corpse of somebody I knew?”

“Ah. So you mean, you felt so sick because it wasn’t a homicide, but a suicide?”

“Nope. A corpse is a corpse for me, whether it’s a suicide or homicide.”

“… …”

“When I arrived at Mikoko’s place, I buzzed her intercom. There was no reply. Realizing, based on assorted experiences, that it was probably a bad sign, I hurried into her room. And what did I see? The dead body of Mikoko, who had strangled herself, lying on the bed.”

Strangulation.

This was why Tomoe had been strangled from behind and Mikoko from the front.

“She strangled herself? Is that even possible?”

“It’s actually a fairly common suicide method. Of course, in Mikoko’s case, it wasn’t her arteries that were cut off, it was her windpipe. It’s an extremely agonizing way to go. Your face gets all puffy. It ain’t pretty.”

You had to have some fricking resolve to choose such a death.

In this case, Mikoko Aoii’s resolve…

“So by the bed there was a suicide note. Addressed to me. It had a lot to say. It talked about how she had killed Tomoe, and what she wanted me to do.”

“What she wanted you to do?”

“She didn’t want people to think it was a suicide. She didn’t mind dying, but she didn’t want people to think she was a horrible person and that she had killed Tomoe.”

“I’m not following you. Give it to me straight, man.”

“What I mean is, she asked me to get rid of all the evidence. The neck strap she had stolen from the scene of the murder, and then of course the note itself, as well as the ribbon she used to kill Tomoe that also pointed to her own suicide. And there were some other things as well.”

“Ahh, I get it.” Zerozaki slowly nodded and then looked up at the sky. “Yeah, it’s starting to click. So you did what she asked. Come to

think of it, something did seem strange. I noticed it myself. Something about the time was off. You left your place at eleven o'clock and arrived at Aoii's place within ten minutes, the cops arrived within another ten minutes, and you arrived at the police station within yet another ten minutes, at which point it was exactly twelve o'clock. That leaves thirty minutes extra. So you were doing something during those thirty minutes."

"Yeah. But obviously I didn't leave the room, or the security cameras in the hallway would've captured me, and obviously I had to report it to the police. So what do you think I did?"

"You said you'd been frisked by the time you exited the building. Then could it be… Oh, man…you ate it?"

Bingo, I nodded.

Anyone could've guessed by this point. And this was Hitoshiki Zerozaki, no less.

"You ate it."

"Yeah. It was delicious," I joked. "People who do that are traditionally known as stuffers. But that's not important. At any rate, even I can't keep down what I can't digest, so I had to suppress the urge to vomit as I called the police. I was planning to hold it in until I got home, but I couldn't make it, and I ended up hurling at the police station."

"You ate the goddamn evidence…" Zerozaki said in awe. "The ribbon, too? Do you realize you ate something that killed two people? That's insanity, man."

"Yeah, no doubt. I didn't think it was sane."

"But why did you go along with Aoii's request? You could've just ignored it, and you wouldn't have had to cross such a rickety-ass bridge."

"Yeah, well, I guess I was brooding over some things myself. You could call it a form of atonement," I said, breaking eye contact with Zerozaki. "Anyway, that sums up the death of Mikoko Aoii. She

killed herself. In reality, the story should have ended there…"

"But the case continued, contrary to expectations."

"Yup." I sighed. "That…was a real surprise."

"What about Atemiya, then? Why did she kill Usami?"

"Well, we can only speculate. I wasn't involved in that case at all. But I've got a theory that seems to hold water. It's just your regular, everyday murder case. Muimi probably thought something was fishy about Mikoko's death in the first place. In fact, Mikoko might have told Muimi and only Muimi about killing Tomoe. In any case, let's posit that Muimi was wise to the fact that Tomoe was murdered by Mikoko, who then killed herself."

"Okay."

"What would she do?"

For the sake of someone else. For someone other than herself.

"What could she do for Mikoko? Zerozaki, what would you have done?"

"Nothing. Aoii was already dead."

Indeed.

Even for someone who was still alive, Zerozaki probably wouldn't do a thing. Nor would I. It was that simple.

"But Muimi wanted to do something. To avenge Mikoko, and to protect her."

"By avenge, you mean killing you. Well, I guess you kind of rejected Aoii, after all. Makes sense. Isn't that exactly what I said? That Aoii had the hots for you?"

"Don't act like a bigshot about it. Even I realized that."

"You mean you knew and you were just blowing her off? Man, then

you have no right to complain about almost getting killed. But what do you mean Muimi was trying to protect her? How did killing Usami add up to protecting Aoii?"

"It's just like what I did. Muimi was trying to safeguard Mikoko's good name. In other words, if a third murder occurred, nobody would suspect that the second victim, Mikoko, was actually the one who killed Tomoe, which is to say, a close friend."

"Okay, fair enough. But why Usami? She could've just killed anybody. She didn't have to kill a friend."

"She killed him because he was a friend. If the third victim had been someone completely unrelated to Tomoe and Mikoko, the police might not even consider it a third case. So the most likely candidates to be the next victim were Akiharu Usami and me. And I know what you're thinking, Zerozaki. Why didn't she just kill me, then? Indeed. But I don't live in an antique of an apartment because I think it's cool. There's no harder place to kill a person."

Thin walls, and hallways that creaked just from walking down them□sneaking in, having a scuffle, or killing a person in my apartment building was impossible.

"So Akiharu Usami was the next best thing? Still, even if Aoii was Atemiya's close friend, wasn't Usami her friend too? How could she?"

"I doubted it myself. Not to mention that Tomoe was Muimi's friend as well. I couldn't see how Muimi could forgive the killer. So I asked her. And this was what she said: It's purely a matter of priorities. Basically what that means is that for Muimi, the deceased Mikoko was worth more than the living Akiharu, and the culprit, Mikoko, worth more than the victim, Tomoe."

"That's terrible. Usami got screwed more than anyone."

"Maybe so."

Akiharu had foretold that he would be next and claimed he could die happily. Just how much of the truth had he figured out? This

was a mystery to me. In fact, I couldn't even begin to guess. Was it too romantic to suppose that Akiharu arrived at the truth in its entirety and still let Muimi kill him? If that was the case, then Akiharu Usami was the one admirable person in this whole rigmarole.

Namely, because he accepted all of his friends as they were.

"Say…" Zerozaki halted for a while, in deep thought like a Rodin sculpture, before he uncrossed his arms and looked up at me. "I understand the logic and all, but I've got the same doubts I had with Aoii. This is all based on the premise that Atemiya killed him, right? Aoii left behind a suicide note, so that's one thing. But in Atemiya's case, you've got to pull a Kindaichi process of elimination. You figured it all out from that one phone call, without any evidence. If it wasn't because Atemiya and you were the only ones left, I don't know what to think."

"Do you have some problem with Yokomizo?"

I couldn't help but sense some hostility in Zerozaki's references to Kindaichi. Nevertheless, he simply shook his head.

"Nah, not really," he answered. "But the covers are too scary so I only watch the TV dramas. I don't really like him or hate him, to be honest."

"Ah."

"Is that all it is?"

"No. Think back. Remember what I asked Sasaki?"

"Oh. Whether that 'x over y' inscription was there. So? I thought you said that wasn't important."

"The meaning is irrelevant. It was nothing more than random symbols at that point. It only meant something in Tomoe's case. But the fact that the same formula was found at the site of Akiharu's death suggests something very odd."

"Why?"

“That ‘x over y’ found at each crime scene was…a secret. It was known to the police only. Sasaki didn’t even mention it at first. The only other people who could’ve known about it were you and me, since we broke into the crime scene, and anyone I happened to ask, ‘What do you suppose x over y means?’”

Namely, Aikawa, Mikoko, and Muimi, just the three of them.

“There must have been others,” Zerozaki objected. “People working on the case and such.”

“True. There were plenty of people who knew. But Muimi was the only one who thought it was a dying message.”

“Ahh, because the police think it was the killer’s signature rather than a dying message. And?”

“In Akiharu’s case, Sasaki said there were indications that the victim had written the message himself. Why only in this instance? Most likely because the killer coerced her victim into writing it before killing him to emphasize that this was a third case.”

“And she wouldn’t have had that idea in the first place if she hadn’t thought it was a dying message. So, did Atemiya know what ‘x over y’ means?”

“Probably not.”

If she’d known the meaning of the formula, she probably wouldn’t have used it even if it would enhance the semblance of continuity.

“And that was enough for you to decide that Atemiya was the culprit?”

“Yeah. Of course, it was partially speculation. I kind of figured she seemed the most likely to do such a thing. Even I was moved by her loyalty to Mikoko.”

“Liar.” Zerozaki chuckled. “Man, I’m not trusting a thing you say anymore. You’re no bystander, you’re just a plain old liar.”

“I believe I told you that.”

“Don’t flaunt your faults.”

“Yeah, I know I shouldn’t,” I deflected. “Anyway, it looks like you don’t have any other questions. Can we close the books on this case?”

“Not a very grand finale… Hah… How do you say it? Hearing the whole story laid out, it seems like such…”

“A riot?”

“Nah, nonsense,” he corrected, as if he’d been treated to the lamest of jokes.

I felt pretty much the same way.

It was terribly grotesque, terribly warped, and terribly vile; its ludicrous, embarrassing, and unsightly shape like some joke.

In the end, your thinking didn’t cease.

No matter how much you willed yourself.

Your brain matter kept at it, automatically.

Who and what were in the wrong?

That was probably simple enough in and of itself. It involved familiar issues and could win anyone’s understanding and sympathy and compassion.

That was what made it so unpleasant.

I don’t get it□how I wish I could have thought so and washed my hands of it.

“Well, without prying too deep,” Zerozaki said, looking off the other way like he was through with me. “I’ll bet you won’t give me a straight answer, so…forgetting all of that.”

“Huh. You’re awfully quick to give up.”

“I’ve got a few ideas up my sleeve, but will you tell me one thing,

nonsense user?”

“What is it, serial killer?”

“Your thoughts?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do you feel about the fact that three people have died around you?” He suddenly seemed to be enjoying himself. He sounded like a carefee boy who was getting a kick out of gazing into the mirror. “You had people killing friends, killing themselves, killing for their friends, being killed for friends, and as a bonus, you almost got killed. How do you feel about all that?”

“……”

A straightforward question that I doubt I could have posed.

I tried to fold my arms and make like I was thinking to buy some time, but my broken fingers wouldn’t even allow that.

“Zerozaki, here’s how I feel about this string of cases.”

“Okay, let’s have it.”

“I talked a little too much this time. My throat hurts almost as much as my fingers.”

“……”

Zerozaki froze. His face twitched for an instant before he exploded into laughter.

“Gahahahahaha! I’ll bet it does. In other words, you don’t care if your friends die.”

“No, even a guy like me undergoes some shock at the death of a friend. It’s just that I hadn’t become friends with these people yet.”

Of the lot of them, I resembled Tomoe Emoto the most, and surely that closeness was why she was the most distant.

I couldn't respond to Mikoko Aoii's affection with affection, and Muimi Atemiya's aggressive displays of emotion were totally foreign to me.

Likewise, Akiharu Usami's graciousness was something I lacked.

"You're so unfree," accused Zerozaki.

"Not really."

"Yes you are. You restrain yourself."

"Better than having others restrain me. What exactly do you think it means to be free? Does freedom mean killing people?"

"Ah… My idea of freedom? Keheh," Zerozaki let out a suggestive snicker. "Well, to be honest, I hate that damn word. I despise it. It makes my skin crawl."

"Yeah, I don't like it either."

"It's a cheap word in Japan, huh? People just throw it around in any context. They use it like an excuse. As in, Don't I at least have the freedom to dye my hair? What a load of crap. But I pretty much just do what I want, so I don't care what freedom really means. To hell with restraints, whether it's others' or your own."

"Fair enough." I sighed and nodded. "Then I guess if I hadn't restrained myself, I would've turned out like you."

"Does that mean if I'd restrained myself, I would've turned out like you?"

How utterly unappealing.

"I think I'll pass on that."

"Yeah, that's a big no thank you."

Zerozaki laughed, and I didn't.

Despite our idle chatter, at some point the hospital had appeared

before us. We'd been conversing while standing still for some time now, which I hadn't noticed at all. At this point, I really had been talking too much.

From there, we discussed things that had nothing to do with the murders. Things that had nothing to do with anything besides us.

For probably two whole hours.

Ridiculous things that would serve no purpose in life. Things that would bring neither help nor harm to the world.

Some topics he would bring up. Some topics I brought up.

If you had three wishes, what would you ask for? If you found a hundred million yen, how would you spend it? Which is more beautiful, an isosceles or an equilaterial triangle? Which is bigger, a kilometer or a kilogram? Would you rather belong to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or the Rosicrucian Order? Is it possible to have a 115-by-115 magic square? What was the deal with 88 Othello, anyhow?

We conversed like two good friends.

But Zerozaki was no friend of mine, and I was no friend of his.

We may as well have been talking to ourselves.

It was all meaningless, worthless small talk.

I thought it neither enjoyable nor unenjoyable.

I was reexamining how I'd lived these past nineteen years.

A reflection of light.

Hitoshiki Zerozaki.

It was a wholly inconceivable chunk of time, but sure enough, the hands of that enchanted clock slowly made their way to zero.

"Well, that puts my doubts to rest," he said. "I guess this is

farewell."

"Yeah," I agreed readily.

"Nice killing time with ya." Zerozaki lifted his rear end off the banister he had been sitting on. "Say," he asked with a sideways glance, "you planning on staying in Kyoto permanently?"

"Hard to say. I'm kind of a wanderer. I reckon I'll be here as long as I'm in college, but you never know when I might drop out."

"Gotcha. Well, then what's a place you don't think you'll ever go in your whole life?"

"Hmm… I doubt I'll ever go to the North or South Pole, for starters." After pretending to give it a moment's thought, I gave my stock answer. "The one place I definitely want to avoid is Texas in America. Especially Houston. I'd rather have every damn bone in my body broken than go back there."

"Huh." Zerozaki nodded. "I guess I'll go there, then."

"Can you speak English?"

"I went to junior high. Besides, a knife gets through where words don't. Of course," he layered caustically, "your knife probably wouldn't."

I shrugged at his biting comment. "Then I guess we won't meet again."

"Fine by me, since it's not the most pleasant sight."

"Yeah, true enough."

And we probably wouldn't. I'd have no desire to see him, and he'd feel the same way. This had been an impossible encounter to begin with, so such was the logical conclusion.

I posed one last question.

I was taking a good look at the deepest, darkest part of me.

“Tell me, Zerozaki.”

“What?”

“Is there someone you love?”

“Hell no, man. Incidentally, I hate myself the most. Or maybe you. Why do you ask?”

“I’ve got someone.”

Zerozaki looked just a bit surprised but soon gave a gloating sneer. “When I asked you before, you said you didn’t know.”

“Yeah, I was lying.”

“I see. Well, I guess that’s the difference between you and me.”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“You’d better keep on living, then. Don’t become like me.”

“Same to you.”

His back to me, he began walking toward Imadegawa Street, and my back to him, I began walking toward the hospital reception.

Neither of us said a word, but I’m sure we were thinking the same thing.

“Now then…”

The tale had ended for me, too.

But even if a world or two that were the other side of the mirror

crumbled, I could think of at least a couple of people who had no intention of letting things end thus, and that made me melancholic.

Maybe there was a kind of rough justice to it.

“Life is rough, isn’t it, No Longer Human?” muttered the Defective Product.

I was speaking to myself.

Final Chapter

A WORLD THAT CAN'T END

TOMO KUNAGISA

????

With all of my fingers besides the left thumb placed in braces, the doctor told me they'd take about two weeks to heal to the point of not interfering with my daily life as long as I went easy on them.

The following day, I headed for Kunagisa's condominium in Shirosaki, the top residential area in Kyoto. I thought it would be nice if I showed up looking cool on the Vespa I had inherited from Mikoko, but the finger braces wouldn't allow it, so I gave up. It seemed I would have to wait a bit longer before I could enjoy that sweet feeling of going for a spin.

The braces proved to be more of an inconvenience than I had initially expected. I figured, "Oh, so my fingers won't be able to bend as much for a while, big deal," but during the first evening alone, I realized that it was going to place a considerable strain on my daily life. Even getting dressed was a big chore. I realized that I was going to become even more of a burden to Miiko next door and entered a moderately pessimistic phase.

And so it was that my mode of transportation this day was my own two feet. Three hours was a bit intense for someone suffering from injuries, and I could've just as easily taken a bus or taxi, but considering the high cost of the medical bills for my fingers, I had decided to save my money instead.

"But I'll bet she's gonna be there…"

Muttering such things to myself, I eventually arrived in Shirosaki and in front of Kunagisa's condo. It was a posh, brick building that looked more like a fortress. The thirty-first and thirty-second floors both belonged to Kunagisa.

I passed through the gazes of a number of stony security guards sitting firm as rocks in the entrance area (they knew my face by now) and headed for the elevator lobby. An elevator was already on the first floor before I even called it. I pushed the button, opened

the door, and went in. I used a key to unlock the button case, exposing the buttons for floors thirty-one and thirty-two, and pressed the one for thirty-two.

The sensation of gravity gone awry continued for a whole minute.

I exited the elevator once it stopped and approached the steel door straight ahead of me. As vastly superior as this place was to my own, it still lacked an intercom. Kunagisa almost never received any visitors, so there was no need.

I opened the lock with a key and fingerprint scan and entered.

“Tomo-o-o, it’s meee. I’m i-i-in,” I called out as I walked down the hallway (although “hallway” doesn’t sound right; the staircase alone was bigger than my room). On the thirty-first floor below, most of the walls had been knocked down to make space for a ridiculously enormous computer, whereas the thirty-second floor was more like a maze, making it easy for me with my poor memory to get mixed up. Now where was that girl?

I realized I should have called her ahead of time, but my fingers were in no condition to be operating a phone. My left thumb was still functioning normally, of course, so I could have done it with enough effort, but I was in no mood to exert that effort.

“Tomo, where are you?” I called out again as I continued walking down the hall. I began to see bizarre cords and cables of unknown varieties tangled along the floor. Of course, I had set foot in this place any number of times by now, but for a guy like me who didn’t know the first thing about mechanical or electronic engineering, it was still like a magic kingdom. If I wasn’t careful, I could easily trip on something and fall, so I made sure to take caution.

“Tomo, it’s me. You’re somewhere in here, right?”

“Yo, I’m over here, thisaway, thisaway.”

The responding voice didn’t belong to Kunagisa.

As expected, it was red.

“…”

Not that voices have colors.

“Actually, I was hoping you wouldn’t be here…”

Is life ever that easy?

I walked in the direction of the voice until I arrived at last in an empty room about ten mats in size. In this disgustingly big mansion of a condo, there were spaces even Tomo Kunagisa couldn’t find a use for. I supposed it was also just a matter of time.

Then again, she needed a room like this if she was going to have guests.

“Yo. Long time no see.”

Inside, Aikawa and…

“Wawawawa, it’s Iichan!”

Tomo Kunagisa were sitting across from each other, drinking cola out of cans.

Hawaiian-blue hair, the petite frame of a child, and a hundred-percent undiluted smile. It was the first time I’d seen Tomo Kunagisa in a while. Since Golden Week, in fact, so almost a whole month. But it felt like it had been ages.

It was as if I’d returned to where I belonged.

Perhaps this was what they called nostalgia.

“Wawawa. Iichan, what happened to your hands? Is it just me, or did they get a lot fatter?”

“The skin’s hardening. It’s Flictonic Cliple Weber Syndrome.”

“Ooh, I see.”

“No you don’t. Actually, there was a string of incidents. Including my face injuries, it’ll be about two weeks until I’m fully recovered.”

“Hawawaa. Wowee, Iichan, cooool. You’re dyn-o-mite, Iichan, yayyy. Were you hanging out with some ascetic?”

“No. Not that again.” I sat down to join them, effectively forming an isosceles triangle with myself at the peak. My eyes shifted towards the source of my fears.

“Hello, Jun.”

“What’s up, Protagnoist?” She grinned, cola in hand. As usual, she looked like she was up to no good. On the other hand, she seemed to be in surprisingly high spirits. But Aikawa’s mood changed like mountain weather so it was hard to really judge.

“What are you doing in Kunagisa’s top-secret headquarters? Come to find out more about the prowler?”

“No, no, nothing like that. The prowler thing’s been settled for the time being.”

“Really?”

“Yup,” she nodded.

“We were just talking about that now, Iichan. You wanna participate? Three heads are better than two.”

“Nah, not interested.”

I was lying.

Still, hadn’t Zerozaki gone to America? Maybe Aikawa caught up with him at the airport and put an end to things once and for all. If so, he had my condolences. That was too sad an epilogue after his gallant departure. How shameful, Hitoshiki Zerozaki.

“Hey, Kunagisa,” Aikawa said. “Sorry to do this in your own house, but would you mind leaving us alone for a moment? I need to talk to Iichan.”

“Hmm?” Kunagisa tilted her head. “Is it a secret something?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm. Okay.”

She stood up and tip-tapped out of the room. Most likely she would head off to some computer in another room and start working away. Unlike me, whose only way of passing time was Eight Queens, Kunagisa had a near limitless supply of methods.

Left alone with Aikawa, I was first to speak. “You know, I can’t help but notice you just kicked Kunagisa out.”

“I did. You wouldn’t want her to be present when we’re having a serious talk, would you?” Aikawa said unapologetically. “You ought to be grateful to me. Don’t get so angry. Geez, I sideline Tomo for two seconds and you lose your cool.”

“Why not talk somewhere else some other day?”

“No can do. I’m a busy woman. Tomorrow I’m needed in Hokkaido. I’ll be heading there as soon as I leave this place. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I’d get to see you.”

Just unlucky, I guess. “So…” Realizing that there was no way to talk my way out of anything with this woman, I gave up and encouraged her to begin. “What are we talking about this time?”

“First, an update on the Zerozaki case. I’m sure you’re interested to know. I won’t let you say you’re not.”

“Well, as much as the next guy. But what did you mean, it’s been ‘settled’?”

“Last night, I finally found that little snot. We had a little round two.”

“And?”

“We came to a friendly agreement,” Aikawa said. “He’ll stop killing people, and in return, I’ll leave him alone. It’s a deal.”

“…You’re good with that?”

“Sure. My job was only to stop the Kyoto prowler. Nobody ever said to catch him. To be honest, I’d rather avoid getting into a killfest with the Zerozaki Clan, so this is good enough for now. For now.”

For now. I didn’t want to think about what was lurking in those words. This was undoubtedly a realm I shouldn’t wander into. “Then at the very least, there won’t be any more slashing incidents on the streets of Kyoto?”

“Exactly. If it hadn’t been for your cooperation, it never would’ve come to this conclusion, so I suppose I ought to express my gratitude,” Aikawa intoned a bit theatrically.

“Really you don’t say that’s great let’s go get Kunagisa□”

“Hold it right there,” she cut off my attempt to duck out of the tête-â-tête. “You know, I had a nice little chat with Hitoshiki…”

“You did?”

“I did.” She scooted over on her knees to close the distance between us. “We discussed various things about you, and you, and you.”

“How creepy…”

That bastard. What had he gone and blabbed about to this woman, of all people? Then again, I’d done the same thing. Maybe this was what he meant about having a few ideas up his sleeve.

“But you know,” Aikawa marveled, looking truly impressed, “that was some smart detective work you did. Even I’m stunned. Who would’ve thought that Mikoko Aoii had killed Tomoe Emoto before you even left her apartment, and that her own death was a suicide? I didn’t see that coming at all.”

“Drop the act, Jun.”

“Don’t be so serious. I’m not trying to antagonize you. I wanna be your friend, Iichan, really. But you know, I thought I might as well clarify things.”

“What things?”

As if she were silently reading my response, she didn't answer right away. Eventually she said, "This whole case."

"You're not satisfied with my reasoning this time, either?"

"That's not it. I've got no problem with it. It's you I'm not satisfied with. At all."

"…"

"It sounds like you weaseled your way out of explaining a few things to Zerozaki, didn't you?"

"Yes. But they're all little details. Just trivial stuff you could explain however you want, or conversely that I can't even imagine an explanation for. So it□"

"For example, the reason Mikoko Aoii killed Tomoe Emoto."

"Well…"

That was something I hadn't told Zerozaki.

Something I'd left unexplained.

"What about the reason that neck strap was taken from the scene of the crime?" demanded Aikawa.

"Who knows?"

"And why would an apathetic boy like you go to all the trouble of making Mikoko Aoii's suicide look like a homicide, even if it was requested in her suicide note? No, what I really want to know most is just how long you knew about everything."

"…"

"You made it sound like you only realized the truth upon reading Mikoko Aoii's suicide note…but well, that just can't be," Aikawa said with a grin. "So when?"

I couldn't muster an answer.

“As much as I underestimate people, I know you’re pretty hot stuff. I certainly don’t believe you didn’t realize the truth at all until you looked at that suicide note.”

“You’re overestimating me. I’m not that□”

“Okay, shall I provide some concrete proof? For example, you told Zerozaki something like, ‘Seeing the dead body of someone I know isn’t enough to make me feel sick,’ but it seems to me that that’s not the only part of the story that wasn’t very you.”

“What else is there?” I knew where she was going with this, but I posed the question anyway. “I don’t have a clue what you mean.”

“Go back to when you first heard the facts from Sasaki. She asked you about the phone call you got from Emoto, and what did you say? That it was ‘definitely Emoto’s voice.’ That you ‘never forget a voice once heard.’ Or something to that effect. You’ve brought up your terrible memory any number of times. So how could you be so sure?” She patted me a couple times on the shoulder teasingly. “How could that busted memory of yours possibly ascertain such a thing? You had only met the girl one time, and this was over the phone, no less. There is no way you could’ve confirmed such a thing. Don’t you think that’s why Mikoko Aoii resorted to the gimmick in the first place? She was counting on your lousy memory. At the very least, there’s no way you could say it was ‘definitely’ her voice.”

“And?”

“And that means you lied to Sasaki deliberately. Now why would you do a thing like that? Well, here’s what I think□you can’t fake something you don’t know about to begin with, but you can about something when you do. The moment Sasaki told you about Emoto’s death, you realized the truth□about Aoii’s gimmick and who killed Tomoe Emoto□no?”

The cat was essentially out of the bag. There was no point in keeping mum any longer. Before the eyes of this scarlet, jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-all wonder, such a course of action was more worthless than worthlessness itself.

“I didn’t really have everything figured out at that point,” I answered relatively honestly. “I didn’t have any evidence or anything at that point. It was just a guess. It was just a vague idea I had, like, It could have happened like this. You certainly couldn’t call it a solid conclusion. But Jun, supposing that was true, that I had figured everything out at that point… Is there some problem with that?”

“There is. A freaking huge problem. Now, if you told me you were just lying to cover up for a friend, I’d be fine with that. Anybody would tell a lie if it meant saving a friend. But the problem here is that you and Mikoko Aoii weren’t friends. Regardless of how she felt toward you, you didn’t feel anything toward her. She was just an acquaintance, a classmate. Simply put□you weren’t covering for her. You were stalling.”

Stalling.

And for what purpose did I need that extra time?

To reach a decision.

To give, or to take?

“And then on that day, you impeached her. ‘Can you forgive your own existence?’ Or something like that.”

“You talk as if you were there, Jun. Were you watching us, by any chance?”

Come to think of it, hadn’t Aikawa said something about spotting Mikoko and me that Saturday? What if she had followed us? I may be able to detect the deadly Zerozaki or a rank amateur like Muimi, but I doubted I would’ve noticed if Aikawa had been on our tail.

Yet she denied it. “No, I wasn’t watching you. But I can at least guess what you would’ve said. I share Zerozaki’s opinion□I don’t believe for a second that a character capable of murder would let her conscience drive her to suicide. Anyone likely to hold regrets wouldn’t kill anyone in the first place.”

“But statistically speaking, a fair percentage of murderers do

commit suicide."

"Statistically speaking? You've been around for nearly twenty years and statistics is the best retort you can come up with?" Aikawa raised a scoffing eyebrow and snorted at me. "Don't tell me you believe in something that stupid. Something that only happens once in a hundred thousand tries happens on the very first try. The first person you ever meet is one in a million. The lower the probability, the more you see it happen. Statistics. What a joke. Miracles are a dime a dozen."

"…"

It was an outrageously wild view on the subject, but there was no arguing with the Jun Aikawa. When it came to experience, she was entirely out of my league.

"But I digress. At any rate, Mikoko Aoii didn't commit suicide out of guilt. She did it because you indicted her—or rather, interrogated her. After that, she had no choice other than death."

Can you forgive your own existence?

I'll be back tomorrow. Around noon. You'll have your answer then.

You'll have your answer then.

"Because I indicted her? If that alone was enough to activate your conscience, you wouldn't kill anyone in the first place," I retraced Aikawa's line. "Committing suicide over a thing like that—"

"Don't you see? Aoii murdered Emoto over you."

"…"

"Eh, I guess saying it was 'over you' is going a little too far. Aoii made the decision to do it on her own, and you're not responsible for anything. Basically it came down to a matter of jealousy. To put it simply."

I didn't answer.

Aikawa continued. “Tomoe Emoto never opened herself up to anybody, never got any closer than she absolutely had to. And yet she spoke quite candidly with you on the very first night you met.”

A fatal wound. A defective product.

Similar but different.

What if Mikoko had been half-awake during that conversation? What if she had been conscious at that time, just as she had been during my conversation with Miiko?

“If you consider the facts, it’s obvious why she stole that neck strap too. Why would Aoii need a thing like that? It was a gift from Akiharu Usami. But remember what you said about it? ‘It’s a good match,’ or something to that effect. You, who almost never compliment anybody, went and said that. So Aoii stole it. She didn’t need it but simply wanted to take it. So she snatched it from the crime scene. I suppose this too was an act of jealousy. The point is, Mikoko Aoii couldn’t bear the thought that you and Tomoe Emoto were becoming close.”

“And that’s why she murdered? That was her motive? That’s silly. Can you imagine being killed for such a reason? It’s too much.”

“You’re right, it’s too much. That’s why you couldn’t forgive her. Mikoko Aoii cruelly murdered a human being for something so stupid. And so you made her take responsibility for it.”

“Do you really think I’d do that?”

“I don’t, not if this had been some spur-of-the-moment crime. If it was just a matter of someone going too far, I’m sure you would’ve forgiven her and looked the other way. But that’s not what this was. This was a premeditated crime. It wasn’t due to excessive drinking or anything. She even had a murder weapon prepared from the start.” Aikawa let out a snicker. “I know you don’t really think she used a ribbon to do it. Apparently you told Zerozaki the murder weapon was the ribbon from Usami’s gift, but obviously that wasn’t the case.”

“I don’t know about that. It seems like it would’ve made a good□”

“But only the neck strap was missing from the crime scene, right? It says so in those police documents. That means the ribbon was still there. Which means that the murder weapon had to be something else, since the cloth used in Aoii’s suicide matched the cloth used to kill Emoto. So what does this mean? It means that Mikoko Aoii had already prepared a murder weapon before arriving at Emoto’s apartment.”

“In other words…”

“In other words, Aoii made a prediction. She sensed that you and Emoto had a similar smell…or air, if you will. And if her prediction turned out to be on the mark, she was going to kill Emoto. She’d planned on it beforehand. I mean, her gimmick wasn’t the kind that any old sucker of a college student would think up off the top of her head.”

“That’s rather laughable, if true,” I said without even cracking a smile. “She kept going on and on about how they were such great pals…then killed over something so trivial. What’s more, I know she wasn’t lying about them being friends. That was no lie, Jun. She really did care for Tomoe.”

Just not to the point that she wouldn’t kill her.

If she got in the way, Mikoko would kill her ruthlessly.

KILL.

Die for me.

What charming nerve□truly, from the bottom of my heart.

“So you pontificated for a while, but ultimately decided to denounce her.”

“Denounce… Just to be clear here, Jun… I didn’t suggest that she kill herself. In fact, I waited until she was in a relaxed state before I even approached her about it, specifically so she wouldn’t go too far and commit suicide or something. At the very least, I left three

options for her. She could kill herself, turn herself in, or just pretend she didn't know what I was talking about and never cross paths with me again. As a bonus option, she could also kill me."

"Weren't you hoping she'd go for the bonus option?"

Hardly, I shrugged. "I expected her to choose to turn herself in…but she didn't. When I entered her room, she was dead. That's why I□"

"That's why you made it look like it wasn't a suicide? There was nothing about that in the suicide note, was there? And you're the one who left that 'x over y' marking, I take it?"

It was true. Mikoko hadn't made any such request. Swallowing everything was all my idea. The fact that she hadn't turned herself in meant she didn't want people to know what she had done. And so I decided, more or less on a whim, to at least help out that much.

And to be honest, I also felt a little responsible.

"Responsible, huh? Personally, I think of that as a word people use when they didn't expect something to happen at all."

"Well, to be sure, I wasn't expecting it. It was outside of expectations, it really was. Like you and Zerozaki, I didn't really think that a person capable of murder would kill herself out of guilt. That's why I was surprised to find that she had. I'm not even sure it was the indigestible objects in my stomach that made me so queasy."

"But it wasn't necessarily guilt that pushed Aoii to suicide. It's possible that she died because you cornered her. Because you were disgusted with her. She had antagonized you, and in so doing, lost all hope."

"If that's the case, that just makes me even angrier. She murders someone, and that distresses her to the point of dying? She wasn't even qualified to be a killer."

"Ah, so that's what you meant about feeling responsible. Not for Aoii, but for Emoto… I see. Huh, interesting concept… But doesn't a person's affection mean anything to you? She may have taken it in

a twisted direction, but Aoii really liked you□”

“Saying ‘I like you so you’d better like me’ is just an intimidation tactic. Unfortunately, I’m not some blind reciprocator. People who kill for passion make me sick.”

“Would you say the same thing about Atemiya?” Aikawa asked solemnly. “The thing that impresses me the most is that you were able to predict all of this, including its conclusion, from the very beginning. That’s why you implanted that false idea in Atemiya’s head about a dying message. You explained to Zerozaki that Atemiya ‘misunderstood’ the meaning of those markings, but in reality, you occasioned that misunderstanding. That way, it would be immediately obvious that Atemiya was the culprit if the murders continued after Aoii’s suicide. Even when you snuck into Emoto’s apartment, you weren’t looking for clues; you were looking for something that nobody would know about.”

“It was just a sort of insurance… I’m not that calculating. Don’t make it sound like I had everything in the palm of my hand.”

In the end, she was the one who had done the killing, he was the one who had done the dying, and that girl was the one who had committed suicide. I hadn’t done a thing. I hadn’t even manipulated anyone. How could someone as clueless about people’s emotions as me even try to?

That was really some nonsense.

“So, Sasaki and Kazuhito…” resumed Aikawa. “Yesterday, they took Muimi Atemiya into custody…but they say she was on the verge of suicide. She was about to jump off the roof of her building, and they managed to rescue her just in time. Apparently she’d completely lost it, and they couldn’t even understand the words coming out of her mouth. They’re not sure she’ll ever return to normal.”

“Really.”

“Did you say something to her?”

“No,” I answered without hesitation. “Didn’t I tell you? I’m not interested in people who kill for passion.”

“I’m pretty sure you said they make you sick.”

“You must have misheard me.”

Aikawa glared at me in silence for a moment. “Hahh,” she sighed. “Well, either way… That’s why you condemned these girls, who each only killed one person, yet completely overlooked the indiscriminate murders perpetrated by Zerozaki? To give or to take, huh? Gee…you really are cruel.”

“I get that a lot.”

Aikawa sipped down the last remaining drops of her cola, rose to her feet with a grunt, and looked down at me. “Dust the dust… Well, whatever. When all is said and done, your crimes and your punishments are yours and yours alone. I’m not sure how you see it, but you weren’t in the wrong about this one. If you can be faulted for anything, it’s that you are who you are. You’re guilty of the crime of being you, and so, too, shall that be your punishment. And I have no intention of getting in the way. I was just a little curious… So here’s my final question,” she appended in a much more lighthearted tone than before, almost humorously. But I knew it was when she got like this that she truly shined.

“Sure, what?” I consented, just a little bit nervous.

“What did Aoii’s suicide note really say?”

I fell silent for a moment, then answered, “It was just one line.”

“Wow. What was it?”

“Forgot. Bad memory.”

“…”

“‘I wanted you to save me.’”

“That’s pretty icky.” Aikawa laughed. “It’ll stick with you, whether

you like it or not. Her confession to you would've made for a beautiful last memory, but that's just plain bitter. You'll never forget her for the rest of your life. Maybe that's what she was shooting for."

"Not really. I'll have forgotten it in three days or so."

This came out sounding sulky, but I meant it in all honesty, and it would probably come true. I was already thoroughly saturated with bad memories. Sure, I may have gained another two or three or four crosses to haul around on my back, but they'd get buried soon enough. That was all there was to it.

"Figures," Aikawa said. She gazed at me for a while before her expression grew cynical again. "Say…you didn't really care either way, did you?"

"…"

In regards to what and what?

There were so many possibilities, I had no idea what she was referring to.

Even so.

Whatever the intent of her question, there was only one possible answer.

"Nah."

"Figures," Aikawa said. "Well, I'll see what I can do about Sasaki, see if I can get her to drop the charges on you."

"Charges? What charges?"

"Falsifying information in regards to the Emoto case, encouraging Aoii's suicide, not to mention concealment of evidence, plus withholding the truth and having that little rendezvous with Atemiya. Normally they'd have your ass for all that, which I'm sure you were well aware of, but I'll take care of it for you. I suppose even if I didn't, Kunagisa would, but I want you to owe me one."

“Sasaki said something of the sort too.”

“I’ll bet. I taught her that line.”

“You don’t say.”

Lately I was up to my ears in debts owed to various people for their favors. And it hadn’t even been five months since I’d returned to Japan. Would even the remainder of my life be enough time to repay everyone?

I probably didn’t have much of a choice.

“Well, see you again,” Aikawa said.

“Are you sure you will?”

“Oh, I think so. I have a feeling we’ll be meeting again real soon.”

“I don’t suppose that means you’re going to show up again the very next day to hang out, like last time…”

“I told you, I’ll be in Hokkaido from tomorrow… It’s some risky-ish job. Not sure I’ll make it back alive this time. I’m pretty excited.”

“You don’t die even when you’re killed.”

“You neither.”

With that, she said “So long” and left the guest room. It was an extremely simple farewell, like we really were going to see each other again the next day.

“…”

We probably would at some point.

And surely, flashing a sarcastic smile all the while, she would drag out my insides once more. And no doubt, she’d finish another tale that was already finished.

She would solve what was already concluded□

And conclude what was already solved.

Because that was the red contractor's role.

That, indeed.

That, truly.

"No one's as finished as you are, Aikawa."

It wasn't like me, but I vaguely thought: I don't mind being killed if it's by her.

"Now then…"

I stared up at the ceiling. When I jumped with my arms stretched up, it looked to boast twice that height. In terms of volume, this room was somewhere between five and ten times the size of my lodgings.

That aside.

"I think you can come out now, Kunagisa."

"Augh," leaked a voice from somewhere, but she made no effort to show herself. It looked like she intended to continue playing dumb. How could someone so smart be such a simpleton? Then again, it was a lot better than being a stupid simpleton like me.

"If you don't come out now, you'll miss your chance. Do you want that?"

"Urr. It's hard to time these things." As she spoke, a plate opened in the ceiling, and her face peered out. She snickered guiltily. "Teheheh. You knew all along?"

"Yup-yup. I think Aikawa noticed too."

"Aww. What's the point of this secret passageway, then?"

I don't know what she was thinking, but she proceeded to dive down at me as if she were at a swimming pool. I might reiterate at this point that when I jumped with my arms stretched, I only got halfway to the ceiling. At the same time, I couldn't just dodge out of the way, so I took the impact straight in the gut.

"Iichan, you okay?"

"Like I would be." With my fingers broken, I couldn't guard myself and had been reduced to a human cushion. "Tomo… Please, get off. I think you crushed some ribs."

"Request denied." She hugged me and pushed me all the way over. Though fairly reminiscent of Aikawa's maneuver from the other day, it was also different, much nicer. A heartfelt embrace, if you will.

Squeeze.

"Eheheh. I missed you! I love you!"

"I appreciate that you missed me…"

Kunagisa was totally guileless. Having eavesdropped on everything I just discussed with Aikawa, she still hugged me like this.

I had cruelly cornered two people but let a serial killer be. Yet Kunagisa wasn't the least bit reproachful toward me for it.

"…"

Aikawa had misunderstood just one thing.

It wasn't her fault. She couldn't possibly figure me out down to my essence. By no means do I consider myself a deep person, but I'm aware that I'm so sinful that there's no seeing through the murk. Not even the contractor could glimpse the bottom.

It wasn't because I was afraid Kunagisa would judge me that I didn't want to have that sort of discussion in front of her. It was because she would not judge me that I never wanted to expose my ugliness or ego to her.

Hers was an all-embracing love. Unwavering, undiluted affection.

Even if I killed a person with my own hands, she'd probably forgive me.

She would love me all the same.

To me, that love was just a little bit too heavy. It threatened to crush me.

Her affability, open and liberating.

It wasn't that I couldn't like other people. I just wasn't able to be liked.

No matter how much love Mikoko showed me, all I could respond with was disdain for a murderer. No matter how much her feelings for me inspired her actions, all I saw was plain murder.

Hence a defective product. Hence, no longer human.

"…Nonsense."

"Hmm?" Kunagisa lifted her body up just a bit to give me a puzzled look. "You say something, Iichan?"

"Nah, I'm not saying anything."

"Huh. Oh, that's right. Iichan, wanna take a trip with me?"

"A trip? That's pretty rare coming from a shut-in."

"Umm it's a huge hassle, but I've gotta, to help someone out."

"Ah… Okay, let's do it. I haven't been seeing much of you lately."

"Yep!" She wore a gleeful smile. The only expression available to her, it was still more than I was capable of.

Not being able to return a smile with a smile…does make you feel inferior, Tomoe, I thought with a fair dose of self-deprecation.

"When do we leave?"

“There’s a lot I need to take care of first, and…Doctor Kyoichiro’s place is so far! But it’s to rescue Satch. It’d be better to go after your wounds are all healed, so I’m thinking early in July.”

“Okay, gotcha.”

“Mark your calendar.” Hur hur, she laughed.

I remembered something. “Hey, Kunagisa. Do you know what ‘x over y’ means?”

“Huh?” She bent her neck. “What’s that? A formula?”

“A dying message… Well, not really, but think of it as one.”

“Hmm.” She thought for a second. “Oh, is it in cursive, by any chance?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s simple. Just look at it in the mirror, then rotate it,” she said as if it really was that simple.

“Correct,” I told her.

What was going through Mikoko’s mind when she left it? Left it by Tomoe’s body like some kind of dying message? All you could do was guess, but then you could.

Mikoko probably hadn’t wanted to kill Tomoe.

And of course, Muimi hadn’t wanted to kill Akiharu.

“While I…”

Maybe I’d wanted to kill both Mikoko and Muimi. After all, the me on the other side of the mirror was a serial killer.

“…”

Either way, I fully accepted the symbols she’d left behind along with its contradictions. So that was that. Too bad it could only ever reach the other side of the mirror, and that the mirror had fallen to

pieces.

A world had fallen to pieces. In which case□

I looked at Kunagisa.

When would it be my turn to fall to pieces?

Two more years, that accursed ascendant had prophesied, but since she was an even bigger liar than me it was unlikely she'd spoken the truth. I, myself, doubted that my spirit would hold out that long anyway.

Maybe my spirit, but not my heart.

Whatever the case, my time was sure to come. A time you might call my very final judgment.

"Uhm? What's wrong, Iichan?"

Kunagisa blinked at me with those big, pure pupils. That azure hair.

Exactly the same as five years ago. And now it was five years later.

Sooner or later, the time would come.

Unable to bear the heaviness, I would want to smash this girl.

That impulse.

"……"

□Even then, she was sure to forgive me.

Killed or smashed, she'd forgive me. Just like five years ago, she'd show me an innocent smile as if nothing happened.

Being forgiven isn't the same as being saved.

Nonsense though it may be. Before such a thing happens. Not for passion, but just doing what you ought to do out of primordial self-interest.

Please. Hurry and□

“Tomo.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

I tried saying it.

Entirely empty words, without substance, that anybody at all could utter, a vocabulary lacking mass.

“And I love you,” laughed Kunagisa.

That was all there was to it. Ultimately, there was nothing more to it.

“That’s the Ikkun I love”□and thus, “I wanted you to save me.”

I had just one response to that, no other words I wanted to convey to Mikoko.

Likely, they were the same ones Tomoe had for me. Indeed they suited me best.

“Don’t be so spoiled.”

Afterword

So you often hear about “not shunning any means to accomplish your goal,” but realistically speaking, I feel like once your goal is set, there aren’t all that many means to choose from in real-life cases. There’s maybe just one or two, at most three options to begin with. The drift here being that when you’ve settled on a goal, it pretty much equals having picked your means. If you want to adopt the loose stance of not shunning any, the best course of action would be to avoid settling on a goal for as long as possible so you could dart about as you please. Alternatively, though it’d be a dishonest and shabby way to live, having several goals at the ready might be effective. I’ve accomplished my goal, you could insist wherever the chips fell. Just once I’d love to say, All according to plan, or I was prepared for just this! but that aside, the point is to be careful about settling on something as orienting as a goal. If you don’t watch out, you won’t be able to shun any means! In a world that has ended up getting established in modern society’s manner, there’s no greater luxury than the luxury of choosing. I’m being very personal here.

This book, the second case of the Nonsense User, who is competent when it comes to getting into hopeless fixes, is titled Strangulation well, it’s hardly his second case and concerns so-called murderers. You could say it’s the tale of a serial killer who lost sight of his goal and the culprit of a homicide who couldn’t find the means. It would be pretty pointless and, moreover, boorish to pile word upon word about this, but in contemplating the difference between a serial killer and the culprit of a homicide, the author is beset with conflicting thoughts and impressions. There are helpless, dead-end situations in the world, and when you’ve ended up in one you’re probably stuck there, and facing it is like dying from a thousand cuts or “being strangled with cotton” as the Japanese expression would have it, but that is precisely why how you comport yourself in such an instance might be particularly important. And this was Strangulation: No Longer Human – Hitoshiki Zerozaki.

As with the previous volume, Decapitation, I was aided by a ridiculous number of people. For their patience in coping with a confounding author like myself, I would like to give my special thanks to Kodansha's Paperback Department and illustrator take. So long.

NISIOISIN

Strangulation 1

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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